





Makino Maebaru

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Rising from Ashes

My Dear Emperor,
You're Putty in My Hands!

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Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands! Vol.1

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Yukinari
General of the Left Wing

Raiya
Haruka's Mentor

Suzuiro
Sai's Attendant

Sai
Wagtail Priestess

Haruka
Emperor of the Orient Empire

First Arc: The Doomed Wagtail Priestess Is Snatched Away by the Golden Eagle Emperor

Chapter One: Please Don't Build My Gallows on My Farm, Which You Burned Down

ABOVE was the sky dusted with a springtime haze. Below was a forest of lush green. And there was my house burning in a towering column of azure flames.

It's almost beautiful. That is, if it weren't my house burning down.

With thunderous cracks, the fire consumed everything: the mementos of my dead parents and grandmother, as well as all the assets that I had inherited as the priestess. I watched as I thought back on my memories of my previous life.

Yes, I possessed memories from a past life. They had come rushing back to me, gushing forth from the depths of my mind when my abilities as the Wagtail Priestess awakened like a bud in early spring.

"I'm the NPC fated to be condemned as the 'Evil Priestess,' Sai Cutrettola..." Saying the sentence out loud made it sound oddly silly, and a wry laugh nearly crept out of my throat. Despite my awareness that I was the priestess whose tale concluded with an execution at the age of sixteen, in reality, no matter how much I resisted, my circumstances were comparable to sinking in inescapable quicksand.

Since I couldn't break free of the destiny hanging over me like a guillotine's blade, I had done what I could to live nobly as the Wagtail Priestess, armed with the powerful magic that came with the title. Even if nobody believed in me or acknowledged me, I would lead a life that I thought was right. I used my magic to save every single person I could. I studied everything potentially beneficial to learn. And in the end, I was going to be the scapegoat for crimes committed without my knowledge or consent, had witnessed the razing of my home, and

would be hanged right on schedule.

Holy Knights sowed ruin with every step as they trampled all over my precious farm. They had already constructed their tasteless gallows.

And the one who would bring down the curtain on my life of sixteen years was...

“Hahahahaha! Take a good look, you vile woman! Look at the color of those flames, for that is the color of your sin!”

A lone man stood cackling in front of the blazing column, his fit of laughter ecstatic and unending. With locks of gold and eyes of cerulean, he was Holy Knight Commander Alexei. A grin distorted his face, drunken with self-righteousness, for he was the hero who had inflicted divine punishment on evil.

He was also one of the main characters dictated by the “plot,” or fate of the world, and my former fiancé who hadn’t paused even a moment to consider the possibility that I was wrongly accused.

“I won’t be tricked by your lies anymore!” He gritted his teeth. “You act all goody-goody, yet you dared to exploit us Holy Knights as if we’re your slaves! I should turn you into ash like this house and scatter you into the river at the first available opportunity, how does that sound?! Hah hah *hah!*”

Why is he having so much fun? I wondered. He was once my fiancé, the person I thought I would be with until death did us part, and to hear such words spewing from his mouth would make anyone in my shoes lament their pitiful, miserable life.

I sighed, feeling apologetic toward the tenants of my land, who were probably cowering in fear amid the ruckus. *All because I ended up like this... I’m going to cause so much trouble for everyone on the Cutrettola estate. I’m a failure...*

At least there was one silver lining: the populace hadn’t been accused of collective responsibility, for which I was so glad.

A voice filled with scorn tore me out of my thoughts. “What is it, Sai? Is there something you want to say?”

With a start, I looked up to find Alexei glaring down at me, fury sharpening his

gaze. His voice was low and overbearing, the tone that he always used whenever he punched me.

“Remember this, Sai. No matter what happens to you, whether death or something else, I will never forget your betrayal!” He spat every single word as if each syllable were a vessel he was eager to fill with hatred. “I will never forgive you. You betrayed me, the Order, your *country*! You didn’t stop at that either; you didn’t even spare the ancient blood of the priestess that runs in your veins! Repent! Repent as you are executed, as you are reduced into ashes, scattered in the river and turned into gravel!”

It seemed that earning my fiancé’s loathing of a lifetime was going to be my biggest vindication. Overall, he used to place a tremendous amount of faith in me of a magnitude equal to his current hatred. And although a somewhat boorish man, he was pure at his core. That exact trait had led him to blindly trust what other people said, withering his confidence in me piece by piece. The change was especially prominent after his heart was stolen by the girl known as the “Saint,” almost as if a delirious fever had overtaken him.

I let out a long, long sigh.

Alexei responded with a sharp inhale, irked by my attitude. His handsome face warped further in displeasure. “Hey! You clearly sighed just now, didn’t you?!” he yelled accusingly.

“Like I have told you many times, I am innocent. Nothing you say will affect me.”

“You *still* claim that?! Even after all that evidence thrown at your feet, even as your home burns?!”

“Even if I become gravel on the riverbed or mix with the mud clogging the gutter, my innocence will not change, because there is only one truth.”

He forced his next words through clenched teeth. “You...little...!” Red slowly stained Alexei’s pale skin as he flushed.

I felt a little exasperated at myself for wasting time on worthless protests. *Goading him doesn’t change the fact that I’m going to die soon. But here at the very end, at least, I want to rebel a little.*

I stared into his eyes that burned bright with indignation and justice, and in them found a battered girl bearing a wooden expression. Her raven hair was disheveled from a detention that had robbed her of half a year of her life, and despair darkened her weary black eyes. The girl in the reflection, clad in a shabby, sable dress, was the Evil Priestess, a wretched creature who had only her execution to look forward to.

It was me, Sai Cutrettola, in my last moments.

I bowed deeply toward my erstwhile fiancé. “Thank you for looking after me for such a long time. You have my deepest apologies—I was an incompetent woman unworthy of being your betrothed.”

The locks of hair tucked behind my ears spilled forward like silk, brushing against my cheeks. On the day of our engagement, I had dedicated my hair, and from that day onward it was always trimmed into a short bob.

“I wish that only happiness awaits you in your future with the great Saint.”

“Hey,” Alexei began.

When I raised my head again, Alexei wore a face void of all emotion. He said, “Lilly...doesn’t have anything to do with this, remember?” He swung his right fist.

Instinctually, I realized that he was holding nothing back—it was a blow with all his might. *He’s going to kill me...!* Though I had braced myself for my impending death, pathetically, an irrational fear of his violence gripped my heart. I shrunk into myself.

Then the unexpected happened.

A shadow much larger than the man before me formed at my feet. *A bird...? No, this is... It’s a person...!*



Chapter Two: The Foolish Emperor, a Beautiful Angel Who Would Ruin His Empire, Saves Me

DOWN from the heavens drifted a human with unfurled wings. I felt the wind next; weeds scattered like dandelion seeds in the whirling gust, and the pillar of fire was forced to dance along as well.

The knights all recoiled in one motion, almost as if they'd rehearsed. The shadow draping over the ground expanded in an instant, and the gale simultaneously sent dust swirling into the air. Wind tore at the column of mana-fueled flames, and like a shower of petals, the inferno dissipated piece by piece.

I gasped, alarmed, as the looming shadow enveloped me in the blink of an eye. Magnificent wings crowded my vision, along with smooth hair the tint of ivory. I looked up—and an angel dressed in foreign garb was staring back down at me, and he was like a painting on the canvas of the cerulean sky.

"I'm glad I made it in time." His voice was soft and gentle, like the tender caress of a delicate flower. Beautiful eyes of ashen blue sequestered a smile and shone bright like sunlight over a gauzy spring horizon. Layers of glossy white silk comprised his clothing, similar to the Japanese Heian-period court kimono—the *jūnihitoe*—or Chinese *hanfu*. Breathtakingly gorgeous was the only way I could describe his features, and to match his angelic appearance, a crown in the shape of a halo graced his head.

"Ah... Um..." I stammered.

"We'll talk later. I'll break that binding mechanism on your collar now."

He didn't give me any time to respond, and with a crack, the gem on my collar splintered apart. Nor did he grant me a moment to recover from my shock either, for the angel immediately gathered me into his arms and soared into the sky.

I inhaled sharply, my eyes wide. The knights were apparently no less rattled, because their mouths were gaping in surprise. Bathed in rays of daylight, their armor shimmered like stars under the bright sky. I peered down at them, and

within the span of mere seconds, they shrank smaller and smaller...

With a start, I yelled at the angel, "Arrows!"

He replied with a small noise of acknowledgment before flapping his wings. With a loud whoosh, a current of air barreled downward. The wind that had blasted away the blaze devouring my house was tossing members of the Order around like hay.

"It's going to be troublesome if I hurt them, so yeah." The angel shrugged. "Let's hurry." After that brief explanation, he turned to face another direction and flew off with me in tow.

Everything changed instantaneously. Like a bird of prey chasing fleeing game, the angel thrust forward like a raging cyclone, shooting through the forest of my homeland. Occasionally, he would fold his large wings and alight before kicking the ground and vaulting into the air once more.

My head swam from being jolted up and down, and although we were traveling through my domain, I couldn't tell where we were going at all. The only thing that I knew for sure was that the angel cradled me securely in his large and sturdy arms, and that he was heading in a straight line toward an unknown destination.

My awareness dimmed, yet my thoughts still raced. I recognized the angel from somewhere. His face, his dress, and even the different language he spoke with its softer intonation.

My voice was barely a whisper. "Your Majesty Emperor Haruka..."

Memories from my previous life surfaced, a recollection of an illustration I had carelessly skipped through during my countless braindead replays of the game. A destroyed plaza. Lightning. Torrential rain. White silk sullied with mud. Deathly pale skin and disheveled ivory hair.

The ruler of the Orient Empire, Emperor Haruka was a foolish man who caused the demise of his empire when he ran away from his imperial court, abandoning a body double to the wolves. And that cutscene art had depicted the tragic fate of his standin.

I knew him from the otome game I played in my previous life, but as Sai in my

present life, I had never met him before. “Why...did you save...me?”

He held me tightly, as though shielding me from the world. My mind was brimming with questions, but slowly, the warmth of his arms spread through me, accompanied by a sense of relief. And just like that, my consciousness succumbed to darkness.

Chapter Three: Your Majesty, Please Use My Dress as a Mat

“SAI. Sai.”

The first thing I saw was the angel gazing down at me with concerned eyes. I had fainted, from the look of it.

I lifted my head from his lap and studied our surroundings. Still a little out of it, I mumbled, “This place is...”

“We’re in a cave on the bank of a lake. Right next to Ptarmigan Valley. Does that help?”

Using magic, I scanned our position and the direction we had been headed in. We were in the mouth of a cave near the main road and had come a long way from the village in my demesne.

I got to my feet, turning to him once again before kneeling. I bowed my head deeply. “I can never thank you enough for rescuing me from my plight, Your Majesty.”

“Ah, is it that easy to tell who I am?” he asked, smiling.

“That’s, well... You have wings, and your clothing is also rather distinct...” One finger was enough to count the number of winged beauties in the world who dressed in that style of layered white silk garments.

“Relax. There’s nobody else around, so it would be nice if you were more informal with me,” he said.

Once again, I had the honor of looking upon his royal features. He was so

beautiful that he almost dazzled my eyes.

“I cannot believe I borrowed your lap, Your Majesty... You have my deepest apologies for my abhorrent insolence.”

“Now, now, it’s all right. I saved you and laid your head in my lap of my own accord, after all. How are you feeling?”

“All thanks to you, I am in good health.”

“And your magic?”

“You have destroyed my collar, so I am fine in that respect as well.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said with a gentle smile, appearing relieved. Light reflected off the surface of the lake and dappled his elegant face and ivory hair. The peaceful glimmer made me feel as if years had passed since the chaos earlier in the day.

“My subordinates will arrive before sunset to pick us up, so we have a slight wait ahead of us. But don’t worry. I won’t let anyone harm you again, Sai.”

Hesitant, I asked, “Why would you go that far...?”

Why was the emperor of Orient protecting me, a stranger? Why was he speaking so openly—so *amicably* with me—and smiling all the while?

I was utterly confused, and the emperor left me to my befuddlement while he glanced outside and hummed to himself in contemplation. “The weather’s too good. The Holy Knights might come here... Ah, I know!”

His lips moved as he breathed out a “th” sound. A few seconds later, the clear sky outside the cave blackened dramatically, and thunder boomed almost immediately thereafter. Heavy rain began to noisily pelt the forest below.

“I summoned some rain clouds,” he explained. “We’re not in Orient, so my range and the duration are limited, but, well, it’ll be a good signal beacon for my men too.”

“I have never seen magic that can control weather before...” I said slowly.

He grinned. “Well, I’m not an emperor for nothing.”

As the Wagtail Priestess, I also took pride in my relatively plentiful pool of

mana, but the best I could do was produce wind. The Holy Knights likely wouldn't realize that the thunderstorm had been caused by magic and would instead probably assume it was a cloudburst unique to the high altitude.

"We'll get wet here, so let's go further in," he suggested. "How about we sit together and talk? We have a lot to catch up on."

"To catch up on...? Ah, please wait, Your Majesty. Before you take a seat..."

"Hm?"

A loud ripping sound echoed through the cavern as I tore off the bottom of my dress.

The emperor let out a sound resembling a squawk. "Wai—"

I scoured the interior of the cave for an even surface and gently spread the ragged cloth on the best spot available. The emperor's clothing was made of the finest silk one could find, a luxury commodity for which the Orient Empire was famous. I couldn't allow its damage.

"I apologize in advance for its filthy state, but please use this as a mat."

"Uh, aren't you a little too...decisive? Well..." He deliberated. "I will, thanks."

After we settled on the ground, I looked at him. "Um, Your Majesty, I know that this is rude of me, but there are many questions I would like to ask..."

"Sure. Ask me anything." He crossed his legs leisurely and spread his wings.

Even in our present circumstances, he still looked like he had strolled out of a religious painting. A part of me couldn't help but be distracted by his beauty, yet I managed to ask him my question, my face serious.

"Then, please pardon me for what I next say: I am Centoria's criminal, and you are the ruler of the empire to its east. Why would you go so far as to fly here alone and save someone like me?"

He nodded, grinning again. "You've summed it up pretty well." After a pause, he answered, "For a start, the Cutrettola lands are territory that we, Orient, once surrendered to the country located in the middle of the continent, Centoria. The Sekirei Prefecture, as we call it back in my homeland. You know that, right?"

“Yes. Both the people of my demesne and I have hair and features more akin to those of Orient’s citizens than of Centorians.”

“So far, so good. Okay, so if I watch the governor of that land—you—get executed on false charges and don’t lift a single finger to interfere, what happens to my dignity?”

It was clear. “You would be disgraced.”

“Well, considering this politically, that’s the reason I can give you.”

He was talking in a roundabout way. *Does he have reasons that don’t have to do with politics, then?* I found the specification odd, but it probably was a conversation for another day.

I hesitated. “How do you know that I was wrongly accused?”

He loosed a short bark of laughter, yet there was no humor in it. For a split second, his eyes seemed to darken into an inky abyss.

Chapter Four: Stating the Obvious, Because Only Fools Would Be Deceived

“**ONLY** a fool with no common sense would be sold on those charges. Seriously...” His Majesty sighed. “The Holy Knight Commander, your *fiancé* of all people, didn’t protect you, and for the life of me I can’t understand why.”

His large wings resembled a golden eagle’s. They flapped once, and a breeze rustled through the small cave. Although the emperor wore a smile, he seemed furious. *Am I imagining things?*

He continued, “Let’s see... Embezzling funds from the Order and others, illegal dumping of medicine, inflicting bodily harm on people via curses...” He shook his head. “The Wagtail Priestess does not come from a politically powerful background, nor does her fiancé, so there’s no *way* she could have done all that by herself. And she hardly has a motive either.”

“Your Majesty...” He was only stating the facts, but just hearing someone

utter that obvious conclusion lit a gentle warmth in my heart. The emperor's words slowly albeit steadily alleviated the lingering fatigue and pain from my imprisonment through the past winter.

"First of all, you possess powerful mana, Sai. If you really had been planning something nasty, you would've done it better and more boldly."

"I... I am not worthy of such high acclaim, I..."

"For example..." He paused, thinking. "If they were accusing you of something as audacious as brainwashing all the Holy Knights and declaring war on your neighboring country—my country—I might have been a little convinced."

That left me reeling. "I-I could never...!"

My heart was racing. As a matter of fact, there *was* a route in the game where one could brainwash the Holy Knights and conquer the world. *Though, well, it was supposed to be an option for the protagonist Saint, not me.* But he was right. Armed with the magic of the Wagtail Priestess, it wasn't something all that impossible.

"That requires a lot of mana; even I would not..."

"You do. You're just hiding it."

I didn't respond to the implied question, and he pierced me with a shrewd stare. I quailed under its weight.

The tension relaxed a little, however, when he said, "But you would never do that, Sai. I mean, look at you. Your fiancé's family pushed you around, the Order milked you for all your worth, and you were forced to work while being treated like the lowest of maids. Yet you never complained once."

"That's..." I hesitated.

His ash-blue eyes appraised me with conviction. "You are a girl who has constantly sacrificed herself to protect the pride of her station as the Wagtail Priestess and the noble blood that runs in her veins. Am I wrong?"

"I..." He knew it all. The false charges against me, my history... And my true strength was likely no secret to him either. Though happiness blossomed in my heart, at the same time, I was a little afraid. "Your Majesty, how much do you

know...?”

“How much? Well...” He trailed off. The corners of his lips curled in a bewitching smile. “Everything, Sai. Other than the secrets you keep locked away in your heart, I’ve investigated everything I can. *Thoroughly*. Because I wanted to save you.”

Thunder roared, and lightning was a white paint that reached even the depths of the cave.

The emperor was still smiling, but his gaze was intense as he looked at me. “Do you think I’m someone you shouldn’t trust?”

“...No.” I shook my head. “You have flown a long way. Even with magic supporting you, it must have been exhausting.”

“I didn’t really want you to find out about my efforts, though. It’s pretty embarrassing,” he said sheepishly.

As he grinned wryly, I noted his sweat-ridden cheeks. I didn’t know where he had flown from, yet obviously he had sped toward my execution grounds until he’d been drenched in desperate sweat. He’d saved me at the risk of being shot by arrows.

“You tried so hard to rescue me, and... There is no world where I would not put my faith in you, Your Majesty.”

His eyes softened as he voiced a slow “Thank you.” There was something melancholic about his expression. “You’ve grown up, Sai.”

“Wha...” *What does he mean by that?* “Your Majesty, with all due respect... Were we acquainted before?”

“...So, you really don’t remember?”

I frantically rummaged through my recollection. If I remembered correctly, he couldn’t be referring to what I recalled of the game’s plot. Yet no matter how strained my attempts, I could only come up with memories of his sprite or paintings of angels I had admired in art museums. I possessed not a single one of meeting him in person.

“My deepest apologies... I should remember you if I have ever had the honor

of being in your presence, but...”

How could I ever forget meeting someone this beautiful? Not to mention how he’s also the winged emperor of a neighboring country... Surely...?

Observing my pale complexion, he shook his head. “Don’t worry about it... You can’t be blamed for this. Because...that’s how the *rules* work.”

“I am so sorry...”

“Well, let’s just say that the people willing to see you as an individual are doing just that. Those who look at you fairly would know that you diligently fulfilled your duty as the Wagtail Priestess.” The emperor broke off. His long eyelashes cast shadows over his eyes as he studied me intently. “But...because I came late, your manor burned down. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect it.”

“Please don’t say that. I am blessed merely to be alive. As long as I survive, the blood of the Wagtail Priestess also has hope of continuing on.” And I truly was happy from the bottom of my heart. Regardless of how hard I’d tried to change its course, the game plot hadn’t faltered. But somehow, I was still alive even after my house was destroyed. Furthermore, we had diverged from that oppressive fate because the emperor had rescued me. Although I still had some doubts about the reason behind his compassion, make no mistake—he had unshackled me from the destiny of the Evil Priestess.

To express my gratitude, I offered him another deep bow. “I am very sorry for causing you so much trouble. I will never forget my debt to you until the day I die.”

“I’m only doing what I want to do.” He shrugged. “I’ve been saying that the whole time.”

“But...”

“You know what would make me happier instead? A thank-you would be nice.”

“...Thank you very much.”

“Mm-hmm. You’re very welcome.”

We looked at each other and shared a smile. Our conversation lulled, and the

sound of the rain pattered more prominently in my ears.

“I hope our escorts come to pick us up soon, I’m famished,” he remarked.

“Ah, even someone of your standing experiences hunger?”

“But of course. After they fetch us, let’s take a warm bath and gorge on lots of hot, steaming food.”

His carefree words brightened my mood—before I suddenly noticed the unsteady sway of his body. Eyes widening, I rushed to his side. His cheeks were flushed, and despite the air’s rainy chill, sweat poured down his forehead. “Your Majesty, are you possibly feeling unw—”

The moment I let him lean on me, all strength seemed to leave his limbs. I panicked; I couldn’t fully support his weight. He fell over, knocking me down in the process, and his body splayed on top of me when we hit the ground. His skin was scalding hot.

I tried to squirm out from underneath him somehow as he pinned me down, but due to the difference in our physique, he wouldn’t budge at all.

“Aah... Ugh...” His breathing was erratic. Whatever ailed him must have been painful, because he couldn’t prevent little moans from escaping his throat.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty?! Can you hear me?!” I bleated as I writhed underneath him.

The emperor’s reply came from right next to my face, and his voice was feeble, broken up by suppressed groans of pain. “Mn... I want to... Aah... Say that I’m...fine, but...”

I finally managed to slip out from under him. Almost instantly, I heard the ripping of silk as his golden eagle wings burst forth and stretched. And *stretched*. Guttural noises issued from his mouth as, shuddering, he tried to lock his cries behind clenched teeth.

“This is... Your mana pool has dried up! And it’s extremely severe...!” I said.

He tried to laugh, I thought, but his voice was so hoarse that it came out as grunts instead. “Guess I should’ve...expected this backlash...from summoning thunder in another country... Proves that your king’s barrier...is working

proper...ly..."

He sucked in a sharp breath, then released a silent, indescribable scream as his body jerked and arched. His wings rioted, flapping around violently, creating winds that nearly blew me away. They had grown to a size many times their original and swelled so terribly that his back couldn't sustain their weight. They twisted with ferocious might, almost as if the soul of a golden eagle slumbering in his torso was trying to tear its way out of his flesh.

At the sight of the horrifying scene before me, blood drained from my face. "Your Majesty... It's all my fault...!" I couldn't imagine how much mana he had used on the journey to such a remote place. Not only that, and in spite of his handicap, he had even summoned a storm to act as a beacon. It was because of me that his mana was going berserk.

Mind made up, I clenched my jaw. "Please forgive my insolence, Your Majesty! I will... I will pour my power, the Wagtail Priestess's power, into you and replenish you right away!"

Pushing my way through the rampaging wings, I stripped the tattered silk from his back, then placed my hands on his shoulder blades.

Chapter Five: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!

I reached for the emperor's back, which was feverish and dripping with sweat. I inhaled sharply. The slightest contact with my fingertips was nearly enough for my mana to be dragged out of me. His magical exhaustion was worse than I thought.

"Sai...?" Crouched on the ground, the emperor looked over his shoulder at me. His eyes were listless, his awareness already half gone. "...You're planning...to direct...ly...trans...fuse...?"

I smoothed my hands along either side of his spine, checking his bones and muscles. Other than his wings, his anatomy seemed to be the same as that of a

normal human. *Okay. I can go ahead then.*

“Your Majesty...” I paused, switching to a chant. *“Emperor Haruka. Please focus on my words and yield yourself to them.”*

I loosed a long exhale, then breathed in. The Wagtail Priestess’s mana was rooted in my abdomen. I released the plentiful energy swirling in the depths of my stomach and guided it to my palms. Returning them to his back, I pressed my hands against him. I started with a single, short burst, pushing mana into him fiercely as if to pierce his body with it.

There was a loud crackle as a flash of light illuminated the cave. The emperor let out a tortured wheeze, and his back convulsed as though he had been electrocuted. His huge wings flapped wildly, rustling noisily in protest.

As I avoided being shaken off by their movement, I continued to weave words of power. *“You must be suffering; your body is burning up. But it is all right now. I shall handle the heat in your stead, Emperor Haruka. Please concentrate on the place of our connection. Yes, my palms are your ice—”*

The flare of energy wisped into embers, small and delicate like fireflies. The mana that I drew out from my core poured into the emperor’s back, my fingers the medium. I focused all my attention on my task so it could fully permeate his body. Taking one deep breath after another, I braided more words into my incantation.

Then, while whispering into his ear, I slid my fingers down his back. *“Frosty like a winter’s night with snow twirling in the air as far as the eye can see, my fingertips are icicles against your skin... Can you feel my palms touching you, moving from your shoulder blade to your spine?”*

Breathing erratically, he managed a small grunt.

“Please take deep breaths. And slowly, match the movement of my palms...”

The moment those words left my mouth, I could sense my mana being violently siphoned from me. I bit hard on my lip, suppressing a scream—it was almost as if my organs were being sucked away with it. But the man before me was suffering far more than I was. Inside the glare of rushing mana, I gritted my teeth.

Once again, I tugged energy up from the base of my belly, then caressed his skin. My hands glided from the nape of his neck to his shoulders, before I enveloped his collarbones with my palms. My fingers swept from his shoulders to his shoulder blades, traced down his spine.

When I touched the most febrile area, the base of his wings, the emperor made an anguished sound, a scream nearly tearing from his throat. His back spasmed.

Naturally, the person on the receiving end of a torrent of mana would also be experiencing quite a shock. Perhaps trying to endure his urge to lash out in pain, he dug his nails into the cave earth. Before he could hurt himself, I freed one hand and held his.

His mouth opened in another silent scream.

"Everything is all right. I will make it not hurt. You will feel good very soon," I said from behind him.

"Ah... Ugh..." He gasped for air.

My left hand draped gently over his as I slipped my right hand across his back. I leaned my face forward toward his sweaty neck and, brushing his hair aside, brought my lips closer to his ears. I murmured, *"Breathe in, breathe out... Just like that, Emperor Haruka. With every breath, my mana turns into a chilly air that circulates around your body, from your back to the tips of your toes, and all the way to your head. I am sure you can feel the frost flowing through you. Can you feel my fingers, frigid like icicles? My touch is cold, and...you feel good, right?"*

Gradually, his wings began to calm.

"The icicles will eventually melt into a clear stream, like snow thawing tenderly in spring... And now, Emperor Haruka, you are letting yourself float on the water's surface. The stream cools your body pleasantly, from the tips of your wings to their base... Soon the season embraces change as winter storms become spring thunder, and a lukewarm rain pours down over the land... A pleasant numbness spreads through your body, relaxing it."

His ivory hair clung to his skin, sticky with sweat. The scale of his pain had to

be unimaginable. As his wings gradually shrunk to their original size, I could feel his fever abating as well. Noting his response, I nodded to myself. *I can heal him like this.*

“Your Majesty, please slowly turn your attention to your body. Please feel the vibrations of my voice against your earlobes. And please—recall the shape of a human form without wings.”

I repeatedly stroked the base of his wings to soothe them, and they folded up sluggishly as if they had fallen asleep.

The emperor lifted his eyelids and sent a fleeting glance in my direction. “Sai...” His eyes were vacant, yet there was life in them.

I nearly burst into tears of elation, but it was too early to celebrate. I gave him a reassuring smile and softly patted his wings. *“We are nearly there, Your Majesty. Close your eyes—feel my fingers brushing across your skin. Notice the humidity of the cave. The smell of soil. The sound of rain. Your five senses are working...and you have the body of a human.”*

His back was white and smooth, and I rubbed it, following the contours of his muscles. Frantically, I searched for the hidden mana meridians underneath his skin and repeated my treatment as I trailed along them.

“Mhn...” His body slowly went slack.

Though he was graceful and delicate in appearance, his back was solid and firm. He probably utilized his entire body to bear his wings, on a daily basis. The more prominent one’s muscles, the easier it was to pump energy into them. It seemed that I no longer needed to use magical intonation.

“You are nearly there, Your Majesty...”

My vision swam, almost as if from blood loss, yet I resisted the wooziness that came over me and flooded him with mana until I reached my limit.

Everything abandoned me. The destiny dictated by the plot of the game, then the reality I lived in. But this man picked me up and pried my life away from the clutches of death. He placed faith in my dignity as the Wagtail Priestess. And... he saved me, in spite of the danger he faced.

“I promise... I’ll try to save you, Your Majesty... No, I *will* save you...!”

Too much mana had drained from me, and my fingers were beginning to twitch. But I didn’t care. I continued to transfer my power to the emperor.

My life belongs to him, and I will use it for his sake.

Rain still fell outside, a silent watcher accompanying us the entire time.



Chapter Six: Thunderstorms and Rescues

THE rain was tenacious and persistent.

Wringing out the last drops of my mana, I had cast an enhancing spell on myself. With the strength the buff provided me, I carried the emperor further into the cave, before sitting at the entrance and assuming a lookout position.

My body was a little limp, overheated as if I had been sprinting with all my might under a blazing sun. I couldn't feel the limb between my fingers and my shoulders—my arms were utterly numb—but the exhaustion would likely vanish once I got some sleep.

There was no sign of the Order. "They might have finally realized who they tried to shoot down... A little late, if you ask me," I muttered.

I glanced over at the emperor sleeping inside. After my treatment, he had blacked out. He slumbered under a black rag, which was the one and only viable garment I had; I wore just my underclothes as I perched in front of the cave. Despite the spring season, the moist, mountainous environment contributed to a chill so cold that I couldn't endure on willpower alone for long, unfortunately.

I wasn't exactly undressed for no reason. Human skin would stand out like a bright light even within the limited visibility of the rainy forest, so if I waited half naked near the cave entrance, I would act as a beacon without spending any mana. After so much time had passed, I was more worried about the emperor's men failing to find him than the Order discovering us.

"Your Majesty..." I mumbled to myself. As I watched his peaceful, sleeping face, I recalled the cutscene that showed up at one point in the video game I played in my previous life. The art had depicted a shameful fool of an emperor who'd abandoned his duty as ruler of the Orient Empire.

"Lies. All lies..." I whispered with conviction. The man before me was not an emperor who would forsake his country. He had desperately flown to save me, someone who was neither his vassal nor even a citizen of his country. He must've had his own reasons to behave as he did in the plot, or perhaps there was some discrepancy, just like how Sai was meant to be the Evil Priestess yet

was not.

But...if he truly is fated to walk on the path of ruin, then—

“Your Majesty... I shall dedicate everything I have to your sake. The life you saved, my knowledge of a previous existence, my mana... *Everything*,” I vowed solemnly.



THE next thing I knew, I heard a man’s voice echoing from afar. “There’s a girl!”

Adorned in attire that fluttered in the air and armor of foreign origin, a group of men approached me. Then, startled, they hurriedly retraced the way they had come. Shortly after, from beyond the veil of rain, a military officer arrived. His hair was as long as Princess Kaguya’s from the Japanese folktale. Water seeped into his clothes as he walked. His ceremonial armor and garb were exquisite, yet he spared not a lick of concern about the dirt on the ground as he kneeled on one knee before me.

“I am the General of the Left Wing, direct subordinate of His Majesty, the Emperor of Orient. My name is Yukinari Kiriya. Are you perhaps Lady Sai?”

I rose to my knees, facing him, before bowing deeply. “We have been expecting you, General. I am Sai Cutrettola, the former governor of the Cutrettola lands in Centoria. His Majesty is inside.”

He probably already knew everything there was to know, because after wrapping me in his cape, he marched into the cave.

Chapter Seven: Memories of My Previous Life and an Unwelcome Visitor

IN my previous life, I had lived in Japan during the Heisei era, around the start of the twenty-first century. That “me” was a complete stranger, a person different in thought and appearance, and she hadn’t passed on any of her

personality to me. The best way to explain how I conceptualized it would probably be so: imagine if, one day, a fishy shaman without mana came up to you and said, “This was who you were in your past life.” To me, hers were the memories and existence of a someone else.

In that stranger’s memories was knowledge about Sai—myself—and my world. The reality that I lived in was identical to the setting of a video game I played in my previous life. It featured five nations on a continent. The main story was free and centered around Centoria, while those of the other countries could be unlocked with in-game purchases. I had been a casual player, so I had only engaged with the Centoria arc.

As for Centoria, it was a kingdom relatively similar to what one would find in Western fantasy. Thinking back, it probably shared many traits with the historical, landlocked countries of eastern Europe in my past life.

In contrast, the Orient Empire, northeast of Centoria, was ruled by emperors who descended from their deity, Amawashi, literally the “heavenly eagle.” The nation had been influenced by foreign civilizations that originated on another continent across the sea, and it was a unique melting pot of Japanese, Chinese, and Dutch culture in an approximate ratio of five-to-four-to-one respectively.

In the Centoria arc, Emperor Haruka had been a fool. Some people started to root for him when his character art was first announced without further details, and I vaguely remembered those fans grumbling about it later, stating things like “Why the heck did they have to waste such a gorgeous character design on this idiot emperor?”

But it was evident that Emperor Haruka, at least the one I knew, was an entirely different person. Similarly, my former fiancé Alexei, for example, was a brave, gentlemanly hunk according to the narrative. And I, too, had been such a vicious, vile priestess that one had to look twice at the character profile to confirm I was really just a side character. Perhaps the correlation between the game’s plot and reality was minuscule.

If I ignored all other events and considered only the destination, in the end, the Evil Priestess’s house was burned down in every single route. “I” had done exactly that over and over during my initial and all following playthroughs. That

the house I grew bored of destroying would become my abode in my next life had likely never crossed my mind.

Anyway. The point was, although the scenery along the way differed depending on the story path, Sai was the Evil Priestess who had no family, would witness her house set on fire, and die young. There had been no route in which the Foolish Emperor Haruka rescued her. And the chance of such an event being part of the pay-to-play content was also very low. Given the time I had lived in, I definitely would have seen spoilers posted on social media if that had been the case.

Which meant that my future, for better or worse, was a blank page.



I opened my eyes to a ceiling painted with a gorgeous mural. When I rose from my bed, I saw a maid in her forties or fifties smiling brightly at me. “I see that you are awake, Lady Sai,” she said.

“I... How long did I sleep this time?”

“An entire day, I believe.”

Scanning the scene outside the window revealed a peaceful, bright noon, the same sight I had witnessed before I slept. “I...slept for such a long time again...”

“Please take all the rest you need. Court officials are working on restoring your honor, so please do not worry.” She paused. “I shall make some tea. Would hot tea be to your preference?”

“Yes, thank you very much.”

With a tender, motherly gaze, the woman, dressed in Oriental attire, bowed before leaving the room.

Alone, I surveyed my chambers. Bedding with intricate embroidery. Gray, plaster walls tinted with blue that reminded me of a cloudy sky. A set of furniture embellished with breathtaking marquetry. The space practically oozed splendor, and I sighed. “I boasted that I’ll save His Majesty, but I actually ended up causing him trouble instead...”

After the rescue team found us at the cave, I was escorted to the capital of

Centoria in company of the emperor, where we were currently under the protection of the Embassy of the Orient Empire.

The day was precisely the seventh since I had begun my sojourn. During the first three days, I had soaked in medicated baths practically from sunrise to sunset, dead to the world. Once awake, I would rest in my bed. And though fatigue still weighed down my body, I had made nearly a full recovery.

The maid returned with a tea set, and as always, I asked her, “Um, how is His Majesty faring today?”

“He is full of spirit, from what I heard. I think he might visit you again around supper to see how well you are recovering.”

He must have come earlier when I was asleep. The very thought embarrassed me. My chagrin only grew with the certainty that I had caused him worry, and I felt restless. “I’m causing him so much trouble...”

“It makes His Majesty happy,” she consoled me. “After all, he was finally able to save you, Lady Sai.”

“I...see.”

Gracefully the maid prepared the tea. She poured the steeped liquid from a small teapot into a teacup, and a pleasant fragrance filled the room. “Here you go.”

“Thank you,” I said as I took the cup with both hands.

She chuckled, and the corners of her eyes softened. They were the eyes of a kindhearted person. “It is a strange feeling. I have known you since you were just a child. And now our Lady Fledgling has become such a fine young woman!”

“Please, stop. I’m already sixteen.” I pouted. “I’m not at an age where I can be called a fledgling.”

“In my eyes, no matter how old you get, you will always be my Lady Fledgling.”

As a matter of fact, I was acquainted with the maidservants at the embassy. The Wagtail Priestess wasn’t an occupation—it was merely a title that referred to the woman who inherited the ancient blood and power passed down from

mother to single daughter. Though I owned my family's land, the designation of governor held no substance but acclaim. Broke and without any living relatives, I'd had to work to make ends meet, and so I did.

I had served as a live-in maid at the royal palace and, from time to time, assisted with odd jobs in the Order of Holy Knights' Department of Medicine. One of my tasks had been to write letters at others' behest and then deliver them, and I transcribed many informal notes and secret missives. Thanks to that experience, despite my position as more or less a servant, I had been to most places inside the palace and had accrued acquaintances everywhere. The maids at the Embassy of the Orient Empire were such an example.

Hmm. Maybe, just maybe, fate brought the emperor and me together at some point during that time...? Or maybe...

I was just seven when the power of the Wagtail Priestess awoke within me, and it had come with memories of a past life and knowledge of my doom. Young girl that I was, I had been deeply shaken by the realization that the villain of the story in my memories was *me*. And because of that trauma, I'd become even more diligent in upholding the honor of the Wagtail Priestess—in living an honest, righteous life.

As a result, there had been a period when my sense of justice expanded beyond propriety, and under its banner, I used the Wagtail Priestess's abilities to help the sick and injured. I had to avoid garnering too much attention in case my actions inconvenienced my fiancé's family and the Order, and eventually, I could no longer do it openly. There was a chance that the emperor and I had met somehow back then.

I shook my head. *But even if that's the case, I don't think I could ever forget such a beautiful person...*

No matter how hard I wrung my mind, I still couldn't locate the memory in question. Even when I combed through my recollection of the plot, I couldn't find anything that linked Sai the character and the emperor. I was totally lost.

I drifted in thought until the maid in front of me clapped her hands together, as if an idea had suddenly dawned on her. "Right! Lady Sai, are you feeling a little peckish?"

“Huh? Um... Yes, I am, now that you mention it.”

“What perfect timing, because some delectable sweets should be just about ready to come out of the oven. I shall make a trip to the kitchen right away.”

“Wai—”

She had hurried out of the room almost immediately after she spoke. The expression on my face must have been terrible if she was suddenly compelled to feed me sweets.

“Now that I think about it, I haven’t had any sugary things since before my imprisonment, not even once...” *What are the sweets of Orient like? Maybe mochi or manjū?* I wondered. A little excited, I waited for her return.

I didn’t wait for long because she came back much sooner than I anticipated. She was empty-handed, her face clouded with remorse. *Were there no sweets, perhaps?*

“You have my deepest apologies, Lady Sai... I really wished that you could have just a little more rest, but...”

“It’s okay, don’t make such a fuss about sweets.”

“No, it is just that—”

And at that moment I realized why she looked troubled, because a furious roar in a familiar voice filtered through the open door.

“—the Holy Knight Commander is here. He is making a ruckus at the entrance, demanding to see you, Lady Sai...”

Chapter Eight: Now, of All Times?

“**YOU’RE** there, aren’t you?! Drag that woman out! Don’t even try to hide her!”

After a long beat of silence, I frowned and muttered, “That is...” I owed a hefty debt of gratitude toward the people of the Orient Empire, and I sincerely regretted that my affiliate was bothering them. “I understand what has

happened. I shall deal with him once and for all.”

“But you’re still recovering...”

“He is my former fiancé. Greeting him properly is my duty as the Wagtail Priestess.”

“Yes, my lady.” After a pause, she said, “I shall prepare your clothes among other things.” Rue weighing down her features, the maid departed.

I mustn’t let him continue to trouble the people here. I need to settle things with him right here, right now.

A short while later, I changed out of my nightwear with the maid’s help. The garments she had fetched were in the fashion of Orient. The top’s left side layered over the right in the front like a Japanese kimono, while the long skirt was tied with a sash at the waist. The ensemble reminded me of the waist-high *ruqun* of hanfu, to be specific. The outer garment I wore over it was very similar to the *beizi*, once again a type of hanfu, a large, loose coat with long and equally loose sleeves.

The outfit was mostly thin silk of black and gray, and around the collar and ends of the sleeves, strips of a separate cloth had been sewn, the wrapped fabric displaying beautifully embroidered wagtails. *I think I saw something similar in my previous life when I searched the hashtag “Chinese-style dress” on Instagram.*

“Is this... Um... Was this possibly custom-made for me?” I asked nervously.

The maid was knotting my sash, and her face lit up with a smile. “But of course. Nearly immediately after you were imprisoned, Lady Sai, His Majesty instructed for this to be tailored. It is my understanding that when the opportunity presents itself, the seamstress will make any finer adjustments.”

“I-I see.”

As someone whose choice of fashion had been subdued black dresses, I felt that I didn’t really deserve such extravagant pieces. Yet the maid looked so happy as she dressed me, and the emperor had gone so far out of consideration for me. I couldn’t—and shouldn’t—disregard that. I steadied my faltering heart and wore the clothing with conviction, thinking of it as my combat attire.

“Lady Sai, just like I thought, you look splendid in these! Your ebony hair is a thing of beauty, so I *knew* that our fashion would suit you well,” she gushed.

And then she took out a *makeup kit*.

“Um, y-you really don’t have to go that far...”

“I am afraid I have to disagree. Cosmetics are a woman’s warpaint. You are heading into a battle as the great Wagtail Priestess, so please apply the finest rouge before you throw down the gauntlet.”

“O-Okay.” What could I do other than nod when pressured by such a solemn face? And she was right, too. My reflection in the mirror appeared far more dignified than usual, and most importantly, my complexion looked a lot less sickly.

“Lady Sai! Best of luck on the battlefield!” She pumped her fist in encouragement.

I sucked in a breath and lifted my own fist in reply. “Understood! I shall do my best!”

At my destination, the parlor, I found a young man with golden hair standing beside a rattan sofa, his silvery armor glittering under the light. Alexei. *I must admit, he honestly looks really out of place with all the Oriental-style furniture surrounding him.* Next to him reclined the Saint in a gown that exposed large patches of her skin—Lilly. Hers was a beauty as alluring as nectar, and just meeting her eyes was enough to give you the impression that a spoonful of honey was melting on your tongue.

I pinched my skirts and executed a Centorian greeting. “It has been a while since we last met, Holy Knight Commander, Saint.”



The moment he heard “Holy Knight Commander,” my former fiancé’s expression stiffened.

The beauty beside him flashed me a bewitching smile, the corners of her lips lifting. “Hello, hello. Who would have thought you were falsely accused? It must have been dreadful.”

Saint Lilly oozed sex appeal like always, a gorgeous woman with long, wavy apricot hair—*neon pink*—which swayed at her side and framed her shining ruby eyes. The king and queen of Centoria had performed her summoning ritual via a prayer that they be blessed with a child—and their country with stability. She was the protagonist of the game. And the current sweetheart of Alexei.

“I’m surprised to see you here as well, Saint,” I remarked.

“Hm? Do you not want me here?”

“No...” I shook my head. “I was just taken by surprise.”

The maid, meanwhile, served green tea and confectionaries, her presence fading into the background. Judging by the fragrance, it had to be gyokuro, one of the highest-grade teas available. Although a selection of sweets to pair with the tea lay in front of him, Alexei remained as rigid as a statue.

“My lady Sai.” The Saint dragged out every syllable in a sugary tone. “This is the last time you two get to be alone together, so I know I am very much a...*nuisance*.” She twirled her tresses around her finger. Golden chains as thin as strands of hair shivered along her skin, clinking with the motion. “Buuut, though the precaution might be unnecessary, it’s my job as Saint to protect the Knight Commander from the Evil Priestess, you see. Right, Alexei?” As if requesting that he back her up, Lilly snuggled against her beloved. Apricot hair spilled like a curtain across the silvery armor, and Alexei seemed to jump a little.

He looked away, awkwardness written all over his face, as he slowly said, “Please keep quiet for now, Lilly. I want to end this quickly.” It appeared that he couldn’t refuse Lilly whatsoever.

Observing the spectacle in front of me, I decided I would have some tea first. *Delicious*. “So, may I ask what business you have with me, Knight Commander?”

Even with my knowledge of the plot, I had no idea why he had come. After all, in the video game, Sai never survived, and Emperor Haruka didn't save her. Though our world had seemed to be one of fiction and bound by its narrative rules, the reality we were in had changed course.

My gaze caught Alexei's. In the span of a second, his expression flickered like the scene in a kaleidoscope. To describe it in one sentence would have been difficult, since the emotions all seemed to bombard him at once. It was as if he had tasted something bitter, was startled, wanted to yell out in anger, had been humiliated. For several beats, he struggled to produce a sentence.

Then he spat out in a low growl, "How did you do it?"

I tilted my head in question.

He grunted in frustration and raised his voice, patience depleted. "Everything! I mean everything!" He must have forgotten he was in a foreign embassy given how loud he was being.

"I have not done anything. His Majesty Emperor Haruka and those from the Orient Empire only saved me out of their kindness."

"Damn it!" he cursed, irate. "'Kindness,' you say?! Hah, you think I can't see through that lie?! The Order of Holy Knights has been reduced to a laughingstock because of you!"

Of the room's occupants, only the Saint acted as if the situation was none of her concern, smiling ear to ear.

"If you were accused wrongly in the first place, then...why didn't you tell me that?!" he yelled.

"I did."

Alexei looked as though he had been slapped in the face. And while I really wanted to turn it from a figurative slap to a literal one, I merely continued to tell him the truth: "Knight Commander, you, and everyone, turned a deaf ear to what I had to say. I really tried, too, for a long time, but was ignored for just as long. I was locked away in prison and forced to go without food or water for several days. By then I was barely conscious, which was when I was pressured into signing the incriminating document. If I could have done anything else,

please tell me, because I would like to know.”

Alexei’s pupils dilated, quivering. *A natural reaction. At his core, he’s actually an honest man with a very strong sense of right and wrong. And such a man denounced me relentlessly and drove me into a corner. The Holy Knight Commander, burning with flames of righteous fury. And that fire even spread to my family home.*

It is almost as if he is trying to cover up a certain truth: Despite his engagement to me, he became intimate with the Saint. And as his fiancée, I was in the way. How does he feel now that his ladder of “justice” has suddenly been pulled out from under his feet?

“I can’t believe this.” Alexei hung his head, burying it in his hands. “We had so much evidence. How did you overturn your verdict in the trial?”

A hand coiled around Alexei’s arm like a white snake. “Lord Alexei, there is no use troubling yourself with such thoughts. Lady Sai, surely, must have some—” Her voice adopted a meaningful tone as she narrowed her eyes slightly and sensually curled her lips. “—*veeery* peculiar circumstances.”

I didn’t know what the Saint was implying, other than that she thought I had managed it through unscrupulous schemes.

“...Sai,” Alexei said, his voice hoarse as if he had wrung it out of his throat. “I’ll apologize for not believing you. However, even if they were false charges, a false confession is still a crime.”

“You are right.”

“You are still the Evil Priestess that plunged the Order into chaos.”

“I am aware.”

“I won’t go back on my decision to break off our engagement, you hear me?”

“I believe that is a very wise decision for the Knight Commander whose duty is to defend Centoria’s future.”

“...However.” Alexei’s fingers began to fidget restlessly on his knee. “If you have no place to return to in this country, I could arrange for a temporary residence should you ask.”

A...temporary residence?

My mind blanked completely.

Chapter Nine: No Use Crying Over Spilled Milk

“D-DID you just say...a temporary residence?”

“Don’t make me say it twice,” he said, impatient. After a pause, he continued, “Hurry up. Come back to my family home before I change my mind.”

I was utterly speechless. The Saint, meanwhile, was staring at Alexei’s face from her seat. As always, I couldn’t get a read on her at all.

Slowly, I breathed in, then out, calming my thoughts and cherry-picking the most peaceful response. “Thank you very much for your kind offer.”

Alexei’s head snapped up. “Then—”

“But I am afraid that my life belongs to Emperor Haruka now.”

Dark clouds shadowed the man’s countenance, along with a hint of hostility. His contrite attitude came apart at the seams, and he balled his hand into tight fists, ire clear in his demeanor. “Full of yourself, aren’t you? Turning down my goodwill, huh?”

I gave him a vague “Mm-hmm.”

“Think about it. Without relatives to turn to, a vile priestess could never have a place where she is allowed to live in peace. Shut up and do as I say. That’s the best thing for you. I’ll repeat myself: I can arrange a temporary residence for you.”

I sipped my tea. The pleasant bitterness and catechin flavor brought me back to my senses.

“Hey. Say something,” he demanded.

“I am indebted to the Orient Empire. They saved me, clothed me, fed me, arranged a shelter for me to rest, and have even invited me to their nation. I am

not so ungrateful as to cast that all aside just because you said something, Knight Commander. My life will be used to repay the Orient Empire—to repay Emperor Haruka.”

He sneered. “You might have been lucky when they saved you, but who knows how they’ll treat you later? How could that nation be any good with that bird—that *beast*—living there?”

If I were a bird, I probably would have puffed up all my feathers. My tone was flat. “Knight Commander. I cannot sit by while you slander the Orient Empire. Take that back.”

“Slander? Hah. I’m only speaking the truth.” When I didn’t reply, he said haughtily, “If you have a complaint, voice it. Or are you having trouble denying it? You know I’m right, after all.” Alexei shrugged his shoulders as though laughing at me.

I was shaking with anger.

He plowed on. “You saw it yourself when he kidnapped you! Those *wings* of his are the true nature of that beast you call emperor! Humans gathered around the king of Centoria, a genuine human, while the scions of birds and beasts settled in the east, from which they protected Centoria. That is true, unadulterated history, recorded even in the Myth of Beginning. You call yourself a priestess but can’t even memorize that much? Hah!”

Lilly was grinning with the consistency of syrup. Fury must have been written all over my face. *Combat attire and warpaint, huh...? You were right, I needed these. Thank you very much, my dear maid. Your Majesty.*

“Knight Commander, I can understand your choice to speak ill of me, for I only have myself to blame. I shall accept it as my penance. But I cannot allow you to verbally abuse the person who saved me.”

He scoffed. “What can *you* d—”

“If you cause a scene, this will escalate to a diplomatic incident. Please take your leave.”

He gritted his teeth. “Ugh, what the hell do you think you’re saying, you...!” He stood and grabbed me by the collar, but for some reason, fear didn’t

overwhelm me. *If he wants to hit me, I'll let him.*

I glared back into his eyes. "Please go ahead. Were you not planning on punching me, just like you always do?"

In the blink of an eye, a series of emotions flashed across Alexei's face.

I pressed on calmly. "I ask that you remember where you are. This is the Embassy of the Orient Empire. Inside this building the laws of Centoria do not apply. The both of you forced entry to this place, and if you go so far as to injure me... What will happen, I wonder?"

He paled, chewed on his lip, then flushed red, and ultimately settled on a pitying expression. He shook his head as if he felt sorry for me. Finally, he released my collar. "Sai, you really have changed... You used to be a more sensible, obedient woman. When did you start turning into *this*? Did you perhaps...get addicted to the taste of a new man?"

"What do you mean by that?"

He scoffed again "Don't play your word games with me."

Lilly, who thus far had merely observed the proceedings from next to Alexei, let out a shrill laugh. "Pfft... Aha ha ha! She's a goner! Lord Alexei, it's no good; Lady Sai is already gone on the emperor with wings! She *likes* him."

Despite her claim that she was present to protect Alexei, Lilly seemed to be enjoying her time as a spectator. I couldn't really comprehend how she'd come to that conclusion, yet then again, she was someone I didn't understand at all anyway, so thinking about it was probably a waste of time.

"Will that be all? If you still wish to continue, I shall ask for more tea," I said instead.

"I don't need stuff like that!" He threw up his hands, swatting the offer away. "I'm heading back! I was a fool to even consider looking after you!"

"In that case, I shall see you off, at least."

That rendered Alexei silent.

"Oh, come ooon, Alexei, let's go already. I can't stand the smell of the tea in this place."

Upon seeing that his darling lover was unhappy, Alexei finally budged. When he reached the entrance of the room, he turned to face me once more. “We will probably never meet again,” he said as he gazed at me, and his steps ground to a total halt.

To look away first felt like losing, so I stared back defiantly.

I had braced myself for a punch, but once again, Lilly shattered the tension in the air. “Let’s go already, okaaaay?” she whined.

In the end, the Saint dragged Alexei out by the hand, and they left together. I waited for a long time, even after I could no longer hear their footsteps on the thick Chinese-style carpet, before walking away from the door and sinking into the rattan sofa.

“I’m exhausted...” *I will be very glad if our ties are fully severed with this.* I remained lying wearily on the couch until the maid came over to check on me with a worried expression on her face.

Chapter Ten: The Recollections of Holy Knight Commander Alexei and His Fatal Mistake

HE hadn’t liked Sai from the very beginning.

Alexei was the third son of an upstart noble family who’d bought their status, and thus he had two duties: One was to pursue a successful career based on his own merits. The other was to marry into a family with social standing.

Sai, on the other hand, was the genteel daughter of a governor with a remote domain on the border, and her only redeeming quality was the Wagtail Priestess’s magic flowing in her veins. Alexei had heard rumors that the abilities of the priestess were passed down from mother to single daughter, but if hers was truly a power of note, why would it have been wasted on some obscure place?

The woman was insignificant but for the legacy she carried in her blood, and she was to be Alexei’s fiancé.

Even upon their first meeting, Alexei thought that she wasn't to his taste, and that judgment stuck. He had anticipated a sheltered young lady from a well-to-do family and therefore had awaited her anxiously. But to his surprise, the girl who showed up was meek and dour, without even a hint of a smile on her face, and wearing rags that might pass as the best outfit in the closet of a village maid. Her black hair—a rare sight in Centoria—also made him uncomfortable, not to mention her wholly black eyes that recalled a starless, abyssal night sky.

She didn't sit well with him after they started living together in his family home either. She always wore black, a habit that practically screamed that she didn't want to stand out, and increasingly she reminded him of a crow lurking in the corner of his vision. An eyesore.

Once, he teased her, saying that she was like a crow, and she looked at him somberly and replied, "I am a wagtail, my lord." Oh, he couldn't even describe how embarrassed and awkward he felt when she didn't get the joke! He hadn't meant to punch her face afterward, yet all she did in response was bow her head from her position on the ground and apologize. "I am sorry for my impudence," she'd said. Couldn't she tell that he would feel even worse about himself if she behaved so?

When he teased her, she took it seriously. She never smiled nor flattered him like other women. When he grew angry with her, or even when he smacked her, she didn't cry. Neither did she suck up to him. She simply went still and endured. *If she shed tears, at least, she would have more charm than none at all.*

Alexei saw her on the verge of tears only once, when his mother spat, "Filthy trash," as she threw away the white ribbon that the girl treasured. According to Sai, it was the last gift she received from her dead mother. A memento.

Even Alexei had felt the slightest pity for Sai on that occasion. Yet later that same day, she arrived at dinner as if nothing had happened and gulped down her soup with her usual aloofness. He had been right. She didn't have a single appealing trait about her. The slight sympathy he had for her immediately withered.

No matter what she did, or what other people did to her, the gloomy woman

with black hair and equally black eyes weathered each storm with a cold look on her face. She didn't tremble or tread overly lightly in the presence of others, instead gazing at them and acting as if she could see right into their souls. She was cheeky, and he hated her for it.

In truth, Sai's demeanor and expression were the result of a frail girl's resignation to her fate after an unreasonable life had battered her to the ground. In Alexei's eyes, however, girls should be of sugar and spice, and so Sai was forever outside his realm of understanding.

And then, after she charmed the pants off the emperor of Orient and instigated a huge to-do about having been falsely accused—or at least, that was how it went in Alexei's mind—she suddenly abandoned her docile attitude.

She gaudily decorated her scrawny body to her best effort with a black Oriental costume, then looked down at me with cold, cold eyes.

"Please go ahead. Were you not planning on punching me, just like you always do?"

See? I knew it, he thought. Wagtail? What a joke. She's as cunning as a crow, and you never know what kind of evil schemes she's cooking up behind those black eyes.

During Alexei's knight academy days and before officially joining the Order, he produced commendable results in the war with Meridiona in the south. He was raised on a pedestal as a charismatic leader of his country, which still lacked a prince, and the hero who'd driven back the barbarians of Meridiona with minimal casualties. The populace reverently bestowed upon him the title of Youthful Holy Knight.

And what does a youngster with a bright future gain when awarded status and prestige beyond what his true capabilities deserved?

Arrogance.

Alexei had long nursed an inferiority complex about his rank as the third son of a newly noble household, and to experience the entire nation singing his praises was like sweet, intoxicating nectar. His relatives, those of House Streltsy, ought to have kept him in check, but they were likewise overtaken by manic

elation, and his conceit only grew and grew without restraint.

It was only to be expected that he gradually began to feel that his engagement to the Wagtail Priestess, which had been arranged solely for the purpose of elevating his family's status, was beneath him. After all, Sai did not match Alexei's liking in the least, whether in appearance or personality.

During the conflict with Meridiona, Sai's parents were one pair out of many civilians forced onto the battlefield, resulting in their deaths. Without living relatives or any decent connections, such a woman was only useful to the aristocracy for her blood. If she had at least been beautiful, he could have put up with her, but she was poor at smiling and took everything seriously and was scrawny and gloomy and obviously a miser given the way she dressed. So she annoyed him.

There are women out there more worthy of me, Alexei thought, and he started to resent his circumstances.

And it was around then that the lack of a successor, along with the uneasy diplomatic relationship with Meridiona and accompanying constant conflict, was weighing heavy on the king and queen of Centoria. The king suffered a weak constitution stemming from a grave illness when he was younger, and the queen's anxiety over the absence of heirs had caused her indisposition. The royal concubines initiated a convoluted tug-of-war with one another, even dragging their families into the mix, and they repeatedly sabotaged all in their way, further decreasing the chances of an heir's conception.

The king was a devout believer. To restore balance to and eradicate the unrest in the country, he and his wife performed the ritual that would herald the advent of the Saint—an otherworldly woman who possessed powerful magic that could dispel national disaster. The ritual to summon her had been passed down for generations in Centoria, dating all the way back to the Myth of Beginning.

Thus came Lilly, winking into existence without a shred of clothing to cover her bare skin. The Saint did not act bashful. She merely wrapped her body in her long, wavy hair and, eyes drooping with drowsiness, looked around her.

"What is this place? Why am I here?" She paused, then gave a honeylike smile

to Alexei when she noticed him. “Ah, my dear—yes, you over there. Could you please tell me where I am and what’s going on?”

Alexei fell in love with the Saint at first sight. It was his first ever blossom of love: He, a third son who sprinted toward success like a shooting star. She, the Saint who would save his country. *A woman worthy of me.*

Before long he became obsessed with her, then addicted.

At the sight of Alexei drowning in feverish passion, the Saint laughed shrilly like an innocent maiden and embraced his heat. “It’s all right, don’t you worry. I’ll accept *eeeverything* you have for me.”

His love for the woman was a blindfold, and Alexei did not realize that the rivalries within the Order were growing in intensity. Behind closed doors, another faction was displeased with the faction led by House Streltsy. How could they just sit by and watch while the Streltys rose to glory? What if they were watching, hawklike, for the perfect opportunity to tear down the Streltsy faction for good?

And say, what if that opposing faction joined forces with the mastermind of the Orient Empire—who allegedly had a close connection to the Wagtail Priestess—and leaked the classified information they learned concerning House Streltsy under the guise of reforming the internal structure of the Order?

Alexei was oblivious. He was oblivious to his arrogance, oblivious to the fact that he might soon lose his standing because of his arrogance, and oblivious to what that would mean for the life he had built thereupon.

Chapter Eleven: The Bell Tolls for the Saint and the Holy Knight

ALEXEI cut across the corridor of the embassy with loud footsteps, his every stride a stomp. The tap of Lilly’s feet, light like the flutter of butterfly wings, could be heard as she followed after him. Turning the corner, Alexei headed toward the entrance and—saw a clump of light.

No, he immediately corrected himself. It was a person with a distinct appearance. The individual wore garments of white, glossy silk that trailed on the ground. A thin circlet sat on their head, a veil draping down like a curtain to obscure their face.

It was the bird that he had aimed his arrow at on that day.

Even from afar, the figure shone like a miniature sun, and reflexively Alexei kneeled on one knee and bowed his head.

Lilly was still standing next to him vacantly. “L-Lilly!” he chided her in a hushed voice, but the Saint tottered around him as if she hadn’t heard. Alexei tried to reproach her once again, yet the moment his lips parted, he felt an icy chill running down his spine. A gaze. A gaze that pierced his whole body.

A youthful military officer with long hair stood at the emperor’s side, and in a frosty voice he said, “Knight Commander Alexei. His Majesty requests your presence.”

Alexei closed the distance in a heartbeat, almost leaping into a position that barely met the minimum requirements of how far he could stand from the emperor.

On behalf of the emperor, the officer continued, “His Majesty asks whether you have had sufficient time to bid your sorrowful farewell to the Wagtail Priestess.”

“Yes, I am deeply grateful to Your Majesty for your goodwill. I was only able to meet with Sa—the Wagtail Priestess because of this generosity and would like to express my sincere gratitude.” Somehow he managed to squeeze the words out of his mouth in a shaky voice. His body was taut and tense as though someone were holding him down by the head.

The emperor’s presence was both majestic and intimidating, as if he could control the air itself and crush Alexei’s skull with a single finger.

“Be at ease.” His every word contained power, as though uttered by something beyond human. *“We are not strangers, for we are connected by the exchange of an arrow, are we not?”*

Alexei shuddered, icicles pricking at his spine. “I cannot believe that I

committed such a foolish crime. I did not realize at whom I aimed. I am truly ashamed.” Cold sweat formed beads on his lowered forehead and dripped to the floor, staining the carpet.

He dared only move his eyes to glimpse the emperor at the edge of his vision. Several layers of white silk, a material that even the royalty of Centoria couldn’t afford, hid the emperor’s feet. Threads of gold were woven into the cloth in arcs of beautiful embroidery, flowing from above and all the way to the hem like thin rivulets of water pouring down the ridges of a mountain.

Alexei had spent a good chunk of his life in Meridiona during the military campaign there, so he hadn’t known what the Oriental emperor looked like. Which was why he had simply acted on his astonishment when an inhuman creature made a sudden appearance at the gallows site. He had been preoccupied with burning down the house and, in the heat of the moment, had only done what his instincts told him to do.

If only I’d recognized him, Alexei thought, filled with deep regret and chagrin.

“One cannot turn back the clock. Actions have consequences. But We are not here to criticize you for the blunder you committed due to your lack of knowledge. We instead ask that you savor the duties which weigh upon you in conjunction with that silver armor you wear.”

Silently, the officer approached, and he kneeled as well, leveling his eyes with Alexei’s. “Pardon me. I am the General of the Left Wing, serving directly under the emperor. I am Yukinari Kiriya.”

Though the officer’s features were different from Sai’s, Alexei felt that they had the same eyes. The man was eerie, with an impassive face and eyes of shadowy blue. His long black hair streamed over his shoulders and spread like a shroud over his bulky armor and garb; it was of a length even greater than the hair of Centorian women. He stared at Alexei motionlessly with eyes akin to the bottom of a well. Alexei couldn’t detect any emotion in them.

Judging by his face, the man seemed more like a civil servant or an administrator, but his physique told a different story, for it rivaled those of the Holy Knights. Yet there was an uncanny quiet about his movements.

A creepy man, Alexei concluded.

The officer spoke again, and his emotionless mask reminded Alexei of Sai. “His Majesty wishes to bestow this upon you, Knight Commander.” He thrust a stack of paper at Alexei. It was so thick that it could be compared to a small dictionary.

“A-And what might this be?”

“We performed an investigation of the Order and presented our findings to the judiciary,” the officer said. “This is but an excerpt of that information. Our full report compiles the improprieties of the committee members of the Order... Or, more specifically, I am afraid to say, that of the Streltsy faction. Our inquiry spanned a variety of jurisdictions, so I would advise looking through this as soon as possible so that you can prepare for the future accordingly.”

Alexei’s eyes widened, and he gaped like a goldfish. “Why... Why is there such a thing *here*?”

The General of the Left Wing’s reply devastated Alexei’s ears: “Moments ago, the Centorian king promised that he would establish a provisional board of inspection consisting of impartial parties.”

Alexei felt blood draining from his entire body. A dreadful cold overtook his limbs.

“Your meeting with the Wagtail Priestess today was arranged out of His Majesty’s consideration. His Majesty pities you for all the adversities awaiting you in the future, Knight Commander.”

Alexei could have sworn that he heard a soundless chuckle depart the emperor.

The general was not finished yet. “In addition, the Centorian king has agreed that the Wagtail Priestess...that Lady Sai Cutrettola will be placed in the custody of the Orient Empire, effective immediately. From today onward, we shall treat her as an Oriental citizen. Please remember that.” Then, as if declaring that he had finished saying all that there was to report, the man stood up readily.

Alexei could only remain paralyzed, his lips trembling. *Why does a foreign emperor have reports about the internal affairs of the Order?*

The general did not give Alexei any time to recover as he added, “Lastly, I

would like to inform you that the interested parties who cooperated with our investigation are located inside your country. I would strongly advise you to keep that in mind at all times.” In other words, he was indicating to Alexei that the Order had been driven into a corner by another influential faction *within* Centoria. The man then accompanied the emperor further into the embassy, leaving pale Alexei behind them as though they didn’t deem his response worthy of their time.

Alexei wobbled to his feet. The many documents, fastened with strings, fell to the floor one after another. “I...” he mumbled dazedly.

Once out of the embassy, he was greeted by the familiar sky and castle. He was suddenly dragged back to ordinary, everyday life, and sweat began to gush from his pores. With unsteady feet, he walked behind a tree and slowly slid to the ground, hidden from view. He didn’t want anybody to find him right then.

“Everything’s fine,” he told himself. “I have Lilly.” But the instant those words turned to sound, he snapped up his head in realization. He had completely forgotten about her.

He turned his head back toward the embassy and spied Lilly trudging out of the building.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t forget you, I swear,” Alexei said frantically in an attempt to patch things up.

Lilly forgave him with a compassionate smile befitting her title as Saint. “I don’t mind at aaall. They seemed pretty obnoxious, after all.” Grinning ear to ear, she placed her hand over Alexei’s.

Whenever Lilly touched him, he felt as if the rest of the world faded into distant memory, and in his mind, he declared that this was bliss—that this was the true sweetness of love.

Alexei held Lilly’s soft hand in return, as though doing so would help him escape reality.

That day marked the end of the happiest days of their lives.

Second Arc: The Wagtail Priestess Comes Under Protection and Is Tucked Away Carefully by the Golden Eagle Emperor

Chapter Twelve: How About We Take the Leap and Get Married, Then?

AND then, the next thing I knew, the emperor was bringing me along on his return journey, because I was to live in the Orient Empire. Apparently I would be given a new home and a new name.

I hadn't caught even a glimpse of my former fiancé since the day of our confrontation. It seemed that the Order was rather preoccupied, and only a few members of the upper echelons showed up to see me off, despite the fact that my departure was the emperor's as well. *And they aren't even from the Streltsy faction...*

After boarding the horse-drawn carriage, I was gazing out the window when the emperor, who sat across from me, announced, "We're heading out, Sai."

"...Understood."

The group of carriages began to move. From that moment on, I was no longer Sai of Centoria but a wagtail that belonged to one person alone—my emperor.



TRAVEL by carriage in early summer was pleasant. As if it had stroked the snowy mountains on its way down, chilly air blew over our carriages like a tailwind pushing us forward as we headed northeast.

History repeated itself when, once again, the emperor spoke to me in a soft voice from across the carriage while I observed the view outside the window. "Is this the first time you've ever left this country, Sai?"

“Yes.” I paused. “It is also the first time I have traversed this road in a carriage. When I left my lands due to my engagement, the road was still a work in progress.”

“Then everything must be a novel sight for you. Have fun.” He grinned.

“Thank you,” I replied slowly.

I was sorry to be such a country bumpkin. Yet, though that regret drifted in my heart, I couldn’t stop my eyes from being drawn to the magnificent scenery outside.

Construction on the international highway between Centoria and the Orient Empire had finished five years before. Itinerant merchants and carts came and went in a ceaseless stream, and the small towns along the road, bustling with the activity of peak season, provided places of rest for travelers.

As we journeyed farther northeast, the scenery changed in a spectrum. The shape of roofs on houses, the structure of fields, the coloring of carriages, and even the clothing of the civilians gradually transformed to that of an Oriental style. And once we crossed the border, there was a defining shift in hair color from the blond mostly seen in Centoria to shades of slight gray—a hue they called the Orient Mist—and ebony black. Often compared to various dark-feathered birds, I had stuck out like a sore thumb in Centoria, and I had a feeling that I would fit in better in Orient.

“What were your favorite foods back in Centoria, Sai?”

I hesitated, mulling over the question. “By that, I assume you mean the things I would eat by choice? Well...”

I tried to recall things that delighted my taste buds, and the only meals that surfaced in my mind were my late mother’s cooking. The emperor probably wanted a different answer, so I reported the types of sustenance I usually had. “I ate potatoes or bread. They are easy to make and filling too.”

“Wow, your life was really modest even though you’re the Wagtail Priestess...”

My job had been as a live-in maid, and I had handed over all my salary to my fiancé’s family, so, to me, food was that simple. I had never indulged in luxury

before.

The emperor looked at me, and a brief flicker of emotion—*was it pain?*—shadowed his eyes before he pushed it down again. “Make sure to eat a lot of tasty food in my empire. I want you to enjoy life as much as you possibly can.”

“Thank you very much for your kind words.”

I didn’t have time to wonder about his reaction though, because his usual tender smile returned to his face and he said, “In that case, I hope you have a great experience with the seafood in Orient. It’s fresh *and* tasty. Not just the fish, the crabs are great too.” He paused. “Well, sometimes they get too big and go rampaging around in the sea, which is a bit troubling.”

“Rampaging...?”

The emperor, however, acted as if I hadn’t said anything. “When winter comes around, let’s feast on crabs. Let’s go to the sea! Look forward to it.”

“Thank you very much. You are too good to me, Your Majesty.”

He chuckled. “What’s that look for? You have a weird expression on your face.”

“No, it is just that... Talking about food with Your Majesty feels a little surreal.”

“Really? I mean, I eat food too, you know.” He grinned, flashing his canines. “Yeah, I do! Poisons don’t work on me, so I eat pretty much everything. I like tasty things, after all.”

The corners of his eyes seemed to soften. It was both marvelous and a little peculiar to witness a beauty who could have walked right out of a religious painting react in such a way to so worldly a topic. I couldn’t help but start to wonder whether he was talking about the same “food” as in my worldview. *What if he consumes mist or jewels instead?*

I wasn’t too acquainted with the Orient Empire, not as Sai nor the person I was in my previous life. I’d died before purchasing the Orient Empire arc, so my past self’s ignorance was pretty natural, yet even as Sai, someone born near the border with Orient, I didn’t know much about our neighboring country.

There were two main reasons. The first was geographical; a snowcapped mountain range divided the two nations. The second was political. Only recently had the diplomatic relations between Centoria and Orient become less conservative. In Centoria I had begun to see roving Oriental merchants selling medicinal compounds produced in their country, but I hadn't a clue about what their lives were like in their homeland.

One sentence could sum up the extent of knowledge most Centorians had in regard to the Orient Empire: It was a foreign land on the other side of precipitous mountains whose culture was very well versed in medicine but otherwise shrouded in mystery. Centoria's understanding of Orient was overwhelmingly lacking and, in the plot of the video game, had led to war.

I gazed out the carriage window. Snow, yet to fully melt, dusted the peaks like sugar. From a distance, it seemed to blend in with the sky. Beyond, fluffy clouds dotted the horizon, drifting along at their own pace. The young leaves of summer, lush and green, added a touch of vibrant life to the roadside, and the people appeared peaceful.

Rationally, I recognized that the reality before me was different from the narrative I had seen unfold in my previous life. *But what if...what if someone threatens to destroy this peace? What if the emperor is fated to meet an untimely death?*

Could I even do anything about it?

"Sai, you're frowning." The emperor was watching me, his elbow propped up on the window frame. "You must be pretty anxious—you don't know anything about the nation you're heading to, after all."

"Ah, no, that is not the case. To be blessed with the fortune of living in Your Majesty's land is too great an honor. It is just that... How in the world can I repay my debt to you and your honorable empire? What can I even do?" I chewed on my lip.

"Just coming to the Orient Empire is enough, Sai. Didn't I tell you that before? The ancient priestess of the Sekirei Prefecture is returning to our country, and that's already enough to get my entire empire in a festive mood!"

Then the emperor shrugged, and his smile took on a dangerous, alluring edge.

“Of course, I would be very glad if you helped us out, but don’t feel so obligated to. Don’t ever force yourself to do anything.”

I nodded. “Yes, Your Majesty. Although the contributions I can make are probably quite humble...I have every intention of devoting my life to you until the day I die.”

His eyes of ashen blue, a few shades lighter than the sky, narrowed at my words. His gaze was as sharp as a raptor’s, as if he could see through all. “You know, it almost sounds like we’re getting married when you say that.”

“Huh? Um...!”

He loosed a short, melodious laugh. Heat simmered in the emperor’s eyes as he looked right at me and said, “How about we take the leap and get married, then?”

Chapter Thirteen: Don’t Wait! Get Your Dream Apartment—Luxury Units Fit for an Empress!

“M-MARRIED?”

“Yes, married!” The emperor’s ash-blue eyes crinkled as he tugged the corners of his lips into a smile. He tilted his head in question almost as if silently asking, “How does that sound?”

I paled. “Even if you mean it as a joke, please refrain from saying such things, Your Majesty...!”

“I’m not joking.”

“What if this conversation leaks out through some means and becomes a cause for misunderstanding? It might turn into a hindrance in your path!” I stammered.

Though I’d been wrongly accused, I had still been nearly executed. The choice of such a woman to become his empress consort wasn’t something he should joke about. I had sworn to myself that I would protect the emperor and his

empire. But if word got out about us, I would be responsible for toppling his nation instead, causing it to crumple like origami.

The emperor, meanwhile, seemed to be having fun watching me flounder. He chuckled, revealing his sharp canines. “Well, let’s put that to the side for now.”

Though his face was angelic, the expression he wore was more akin to a mischievous child’s than that of solemn royalty. I, however, was kind of *very busy* trying to deal with my panic, so I couldn’t return his grin. But I had to admit: he was cute when he smiled.

“Sometimes the way you talk sounds like one of my generals, Sai.”

“...The maids I had the pleasure of being coworkers with have pointed out a similar thing.”

“Right?”

“Perhaps it is because I often spoke to the Holy Knights.”

“Huh. Is that how it works?”

“Other than that, it might be due to the fact that my reading mostly consisted of classical works and academic papers...”

“Is that because of your status as the Wagtail Priestess? Or was it a part of your job?”

“It was both.” Books had been a precious resource for my attempts to both thwart the destiny I was born with and make ends meet. “I needed to thoroughly read the books that I received as part of my inheritance, so I have spent a lot of time reading ever since I was a child. It was also useful as a way of studying my hereditary language. After my betrothal, I worked in the Department of Medicine in the Order of Holy Knights, if unofficially, and, well... I studied whenever I wasn’t working, using the collection of books at my family home as references.”

“Ah, so you haven’t gone to school.”

“I have not. I learned how to read and write from my parents and grandparents, as well as how to read the language in which our family’s heirloom books were written.”

I was originally supposed to enroll in a school for young aristocratic women, but those plans turned into a pipe dream after my parents' passing. Perhaps it was inevitable that my erstwhile fiancé disliked me. Lacking in education, I probably seemed like a barbarian.

The emperor went silent for a moment, then stared long and hard at me. "Are you good at writing everyday letters? Did you ever recite Oriental poetry?"

"I could never do anything so refined. The extent of my work was delivering notes to the ladies in the castle as a maidservant."

"Oh, you don't have to be so humble. You leave me in wonder whenever you speak Orient's language."

"Is that so?" Eyes lighting up, I looked up involuntarily and saw the emperor grinning.

"Yep, you sound practically like a native. Coupled with your lustrous ebony hair and dark eyes, anyone would assume you were an Oriental citizen from birth. You'll probably fit right in without any struggle."

"I would be glad if that is the case..."

"...See? Your hard work paid off in the end." He smiled softly.

I considered my life in Centoria. I had spent my days in a dark room with only the light of my mana for illumination, studying secretly and diligently so that I didn't forget the teachings of my mother. *It somehow seems so far away now.*

After a pause, the emperor continued, "You also did a lot of different jobs, right? Your job as a maid, as an apothecary, as the governor of your demesne..."

"Yes. It was my duty."

"I mean, I already knew this, but...you really worked yourself to the bone, Sai..." There was a tone of melancholy in his words.

"Not at all." I shook my head. "There are a lot of people suffering more hardship than what little I did."

Suddenly, a loud rattle disturbed our conversation. The carriage had turned along the highway with a big jolt, and I was thrown a little off-balance.

The emperor extended his hand to steady me. “Are you okay?” he asked worriedly.

“Thank you.”

One of the emperor’s hands was gripping my arm, and it seemed paler and larger against the stark contrast of my black clothing. His eyes widened. A sorrowful expression overtook his face as he held me.

“Your Majesty...?”

“I asked them to tailor this to your measurements, but... You got thinner,” he whispered in a mournful voice. He released me, gently pushing me back into my seat.

I stroked my arm as I answered, “Yes, I have. I did not have the opportunity to eat much during my detention...”

I didn’t know when he had prepared my clothes, although judging from the sizing, they must have been made before my detention—at least half a year past. Perhaps he had inquired into my measurements at the dressmaker that had made my maid uniform.

I reassured him, saying, “This is no problem at all. Unlike the clothing of Centoria, Oriental fashion is very easy to adjust. I can fiddle with how I wear it or with my sash. Thank you very much for your consideration.”

The emperor cracked a small smile at my gratitude. “Like I said before, we have fantastic food in Orient. Thanks to the meltwater we get from the snow, and the ocean currents, there are plenty of fish around for us to enjoy, and our rice is sweet too. Fill yourself with wonderful food here, okay?” He hesitated. “...And if you wish to have a child as the Wagtail Priestess one day, you should take care of yourself as well, not just others.”

“You have my deepest gratitude for your thoughtfulness. Even at the embassy, my meals were the highlights of my day. I am sure that I will enjoy even more exquisite flavors in the empire itself.”

The carriage was slowing down incrementally as the highway grew livelier. We were probably going to stop in a town soon to acquire overnight lodging.

The emperor changed the topic. “Hmm... Okay, how about we discuss some of your future arrangements so you’re less anxious when the time comes?”

He started by promoting the place I would live. “Sai, I’ll have to ask you to live on the imperial grounds. It isn’t a new building, unfortunately, but it’s really spacious and pretty, so I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“Thank you very much. May I ask what it was originally used for, by the way?”

“Hm? The Inner Palace.”

The...Inner Palace? For the imperial harem? If the emperor were a real estate agent, he could literally put the slogan “Don’t wait! Get your dream apartment—luxury units fit for an empress!” on the promotional posters. He could even brag about how the quarters were one door away from the imperial palace, the city center equivalent!

I was coping by resorting to escapism, but then the emperor, concerned, asked, “What’s wrong? You look pale. Are you motion sick?”

I snapped out of my reverie. “My deepest apologies, but I think that my ears might be malfunctioning, or maybe I misheard.”

“I said, ‘The Inner Palace.’ It’s connected directly to Kita Palace, where my bedchamber is. It’s spacious and even has a garden.”

I hadn’t misheard him.

I was still frozen like a statue when the emperor, as if he’d remembered something, added, “Ah, right. You don’t know about it. The previous emperor, my father, constructed the Inner Palace as part of a governmental reform, but in Orient the emperor is a god. And of course, it’s preposterous for a god’s offspring to be born from different consorts! So the harem culture didn’t really last. The place is pretty much abandoned now.”

“Ah... I understand.”

I had gotten the completely wrong idea because of our earlier conversation. I was mortified. Just the thought of looking at him made me want to crawl into a hole. I wished to flee, yet the carriage was still moving.

“If you keep looking down, you’ll get motion sickness!”

“...O-Okay.”

The emperor then gave me a brief rundown of the history of the Inner Palace from its construction to its desertion.

Since antiquity, the emperor, as a matter of principle, could have only one spouse. Yet the previous emperor had created a harem as part of his governmental reforms. He did so with the intention of strengthening the connections between the imperial lineage and various influential noble families, but the plan backfired. People viewed it as a sacrilegious attack on the divinity of the emperor. Faith in Emperor Haruka’s father started to waver, and the noble families began to copy the gentry in other countries: they used the women of the Inner Palace as pawns in their political games. As a result, hardly a decade passed before the harem system was abolished and monogamy reinstated.

In other words, an extravagant building on the palace grounds was left to collect dust. To tear it down would be a waste, and repurposing it would be difficult due to its historical associations. So they had decided to bequeath it to the Wagtail Priestess.

Then the emperor casually mentioned something terrifying: “It has an interesting history, and people say it’s filled with lingering resentment or that vengeful spirits come out at night, but we repainted the entire interior with a beautiful finish, so it’s as good as new.”

A beat later he clarified, “Ah... Nobody has died there though. Just in case you’re wondering.”

“But something that rivals the gravity of death must have happened, correct? After all, there must be a reason for the rumors of vengeful spirits.”

“All of my subjects are pinning their hopes on you, Sai. Surely you can exorcise them or deal with them in another way.”

“I...do not have any experience with exorcism, but I would be very glad if you could prepare some rock salt, paper, and brushes in advance...”

I didn’t believe in ghosts. In some cases, however, strong residual emotion fused with the ambient mana in nature and produced similar phenomena.

Frankly, I had never expected that my first task upon moving into my new home would be to perform an exorcism.

I hesitated. “You have made such generous arrangements for me... I do not think I am worthy. It feels like I am wasting the hard-earned money of the citizens of Orient.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” the emperor said cheerfully. If our dialogue had occurred in my previous life, I bet he would have flashed me a peace sign. “I’ve extorted a bunch of stuff from Centoria in return, so it balances out. You can rest easy.”

My eyes widened. “Exto—”

“We allowed the Sekirei Prefecture to come under their care out of goodwill, yet they caused nothing but suffering for the Wagtail Priestess. They deserve that much, at least.”

Every so often, I thought I noticed the emperor’s gaze sharpening like that of a lethal bird of prey. *Am I imagining things?*

It was at that exact moment that the carriage stopped. We had arrived at our accommodation for the night.

Chapter Fourteen: A Meal with the Maids: Conversations about the Emperor and Unsettling Rumors

THE maids stationed at the embassy were traveling back to the Orient Empire with us, and I was to share dinner with them at the town inn. Until that point, I had been in the company of the emperor or male court officials, so I was happy for an opportunity to talk to Oriental women.

The female proprietor of the inn we were staying at that night was an old friend of one of the maids. When she learned that I was the Wagtail Priestess, she was elated. She went out of her way to be hospitable and prepared a

traditional Oriental meal.

“It may be spring right now, but it’s still very cold here. So while our produce might not be as plentiful as in Centoria, I hope you will enjoy it,” the innkeeper said as she placed down our food.

There was steamed fish that had been seasoned with salt and rice alcohol alongside plenty of greens, sweet porridge with finely chopped wild herbs, as well as fluffy stir-fried eggs. Many of the side dishes were suitable for long-term storage, including lightly pickled foraged vegetables.

While serving me, the innkeeper hesitantly asked, “How does it look, Wagtail Priestess? Do you think these will suit your taste?”

“It looks wonderful. I could not help myself from admiring them. Thank you very much for your kindness.”

In Centoria, my dinner had consisted merely of cold bread and water for the longest time, so I was rendered speechless for a moment when I saw the magnificent spread on the dining table. I had spaced out for a few seconds out of pure elation.

“Okay, then...” I switched to words of power, intoning, *“O god of humans who created this continent, Amawashi of the distant northern sea who granted us your wisdom, please bless us—”*

After offering my prayers, I had a taste. I couldn’t help but widen my eyes in amazement at the ingredients used. It was both delectable *and* fresh.

“Lady Sai, how is it?”

“It’s delicious. I find it difficult to believe that you can retain such fresh ingredients into the evening.”

“We owe that to the emperor and the highway he has put in place.” The innkeeper puffed out her chest in pride. “In the past, the only dishes we could serve at night were those that could be preserved in our kitchen, but now on special occasions such as this one, we can procure fresh food even in the evening.”

“Ah, I see...”

One of the maids called out to me cheerfully, “Lady Sai, let’s dig in before it gets cold!”

As we enjoyed our meal, I listened to the lively chatter of the maids and innkeeper.

A maid let out a contented sigh. “The food in Centoria’s great too, but the style of their rice dishes is completely different, so I missed this.”

“Hey, Ms. Innkeeper, have you changed how you make the soup base since the last time I was here?”

The proprietress paused in thought. “The last time you came was in autumn, right? Of course it’ll be different.”

“Oh, was it? I totally forgot because I stayed so long in Centoria.”

“Hey, was this fish freshly caught today?”

“Yep,” the innkeeper replied. The fish over there is dried though. There aren’t a lot of fish dishes in Centoria to satisfy your cravings, right? Eat as much as you want!”

“Oh, I see. We had a good haul of halfbeak fish this year, so you can get it delivered cheap even in the mountains, huh?”

“Mmm! I *really* needed this!”

“I can’t wait to get back to the capital and feast on fresh fish!”

The other tables seemed to be bustling with activity too, and though the sun had nearly sunk below the horizon, the inn was filled with vigor. Informal Oriental swirled around me, soft and melodious. The dialect was distinctly different from what the nobles and commoners spoke back in Centoria.

I thought back to the days of my imprisonment. Numb with the chill of winter in my isolated cell, I never imagined that my future wouldn’t be just as cold—and yet there I was, savoring a blissful dinner. I fell silent and stopped eating.

Startled, a maid asked, “Is there something wrong, Lady Sai? Is it not to your taste?!”

I hurriedly shook my head. “Sorry about that. The food is wonderful. I’m just

really happy...”

The maid looked at me, pain in her eyes. “Lady Sai...”

Another maid joined in. “Look, there’s still plenty to go around! Please eat your fill. It’s cold here, so you need to put on some weight!”

A third maid turned to the one who’d just spoken. “Yeah, but *you’ve* gained too much though.”

“Ugh, you don’t have to point that out *now* of all times!”

Everyone was energetic when they talked to me. Jokes intermingled with their banter, and I really appreciated the lighthearted exchanges.

A while into our chat, I learned that the maids would move into my new home, the former Inner Palace with its shady history. I feared that they’d be repulsed by the idea of waiting on an undistinguished girl whom they’d met as a maidservant, but...

“It was blasphemous in the first place for our great priestess to work as a maid!”

“The way they treated you was downright immoral, and that’s not an exaggeration.”

...they welcomed it with surprising enthusiasm.

One of them added, “Plus, we’ve been away from home for quite some time, so we are very grateful for this opportunity to go back.”

“His Majesty is probably also delighted. He has been concerned about you for the longest time, Lady Sai.”

I blinked. “For the...longest time?” *When did this entire operation to bring the Wagtail Priestess to safety begin? Did they start immediately after I was locked up?*

“Lady Sai, ever since the Sekirei Prefecture, the Cutrettola lands, was annexed by Centoria, the Orient Empire was left with no priestesses worthy of mention, let alone one whose name appears in legend. However, with your generation, Lady Sai, the Wagtail Priestess will finally return to Orient. There can be no news more joyous than that.”

“Thank you very much.” I gave a wry smile. “I never heard of anything similar in Centoria, and to be honest...I don’t know how to react.”

“The Wagtail Priestess is a very important figure. In the Myth of Beginning, she was the one who taught the ancestor of our emperor, the deity Amawashi, about human society. Everyone in Orient will welcome you with open arms.”

I took a deep breath. “I will do my best so I do not betray those expectations.”

The other maids nodded in agreement with the first maid.

“His Majesty probably also wanted to avoid the loss of the priestess during his reign, so I’m very happy that it worked out.”

“Yeah. His Majesty places quite an importance on preserving our old myths and traditions, after all.”

The emperor had risen to power in his youth. Showing respect for precedents already set in the empire and its legends was likely essential as a means to maintain his authority.

“Indeed. Though he is still young, even the officials who have served the court since the reign of the previous emperor adore and admire him.”

“From the bottom of my heart, I’m glad that I’m a citizen during His Majesty’s reign!”

“Sometimes I can catch a glimpse of his profile through his veil, and oh, how beautiful he is! His large wings leave me spellbound as well!”

“Yes, exactly. Due to our posts, we get the occasional chance to work in his presence, and just knowing that His Majesty is there... Ah, the thought alone makes my heart...!” The maid placed a hand over her chest as if to indicate the overflowing emotions within.

“Only people with mana can look directly at his countenance since his aura is so powerful, and it’s such a shame. Ah, but if he didn’t wear the veil, I might not be able to carry out my job as maid.”

“Even his back or the smallest twitch of his fingers is the definition of beauty!”

“His soft, wavy hair is like the warm rays of the sun itself, and it looks so good against his white silk garments...”

“Once you hear his voice, you can’t get it out of your head for several days. Ahhh, I cannot even...!”

Slowly, the focus of the conversation seemed to...change.

“Lady Sai, you rode with him in the carriage, right?”

I jumped a little at the sudden mention of my name. “W-Well, yes, I was...”

All at once, the maids swiveled to me, their eyes sparkling. They were all women much older than me, yet they gushed animatedly about the emperor with hearts in their eyes like teenage girls. They reminded me of a certain group of people in my previous life—idol fans. *I suppose worshipping your idol is invigorating in every world, huh?*

Actually, my former fiancé was also very popular among women. *And I was the subject of much harassment...* Dark memories were about to surface, so I gently pushed them back into a corner of my mind.

“What did you talk about with His Majesty inside the carriage?”

I stammered, “W-Well... He described the accommodation he has arranged for me. Other than that, we discussed topics such as food...”

They were the maids assigned to my residence, so they probably already knew the details.

“Oh, right! You’re to live in the former Inner Palace, Lady Sai.”

“We worked in Centoria, and we still couldn’t help but be concerned by that place. If you are the one living there, Lady Sai, it will be a weight lifted off my shoulders.”

“We need to work hard and change everyone’s impression of the place.”

The maids nodded to each other.

A little hesitant, I cut into their conversation. “Um... Is the property...*that* infamous?”

Noting the expression on my face, they all brought a hand to their lips with a gasp.

“Oh, we are so sorry! Please pardon us for being so insensitive!”

I shook my head. “Not at all... I have heard a lot about it from His Majesty as well, so please don’t worry.”

“The Inner Palace itself, well, it’s not a bad place. We haven’t had the honor of seeing it in person yet, but the rumors say that it has a large garden and pristine canals, and even that a hot spring furnishes the baths.”

Another maid joined the bandwagon. “Yes, where it is located has a great view, so I am sure you will like it, Lady Sai.”

A maid bobbed her head in agreement. “Rumors are just rumors in the end.”

“That aside... I am ever so glad that the harem was abolished,” a veteran maid said, nodding to herself. “In truth, during the reign of the previous emperor, I never thought that there would so soon be an era when we could love and respect our emperor without qualm.”

There was a deathly silence. But after the blink of an eye, the conversation moved on to another topic.

“Speaking of which, His Majesty is dressed in silk tithed by Kanpou Prefecture this time, right? Didn’t the silkworm spirits of Kanpou...”

“That’s the place where the spirits went on a rampage and caused a small disaster, isn’t it? Such a tragic incident.”

“It was only thanks to his purifying *harae* ritual that they were able to recover enough silk to weave His Majesty’s clothing!”

“When His Majesty is on the scene, you can expect nothing but the best!”

Gossip flowed like a stream, as if all was right with the world. I was the only one left behind, puzzling over what the older woman had revealed. *Well, I didn’t really join in too much in the first place, so my participation’s not going to make much of a difference, but...what in the world happened?*

In the end, even by the time I fell asleep in my room, I was still in the dark about that awkward moment. Every nation had its own intricacies, and an outsider with no place in the matter would merely cause a mess if she probed thoughtlessly. I simply made a mental note that the previous emperor was a taboo subject, before forgetting everything else and departing into the world of

dreams.

Chapter Fifteen: On the Road with the Emperor and a Touch of Behind-the-Scenes Maneuvering

ONCE again, the gentle light of the sun marked the start of the day's journey. I was alone with the emperor in our carriage as usual.

"Good morning, Your Majesty."

"Morning!"

He was full of energy in the mornings and equally gorgeous as well. The wavy side bangs he sported were almost works of art.

"Um, you seem to always roll up your veil when you are with me."

"Mm-hmm. It's a nuisance, and I don't need it with you, Sai."

"Is it because... Unless you wear that veil, your magic would end up burning the eyes of people without mana, is that correct?"

"Yep. Pretty annoying, right?" He shrugged, then smiled ruefully. "If I have this on, it's fine if people get a peek of me through the gaps, but... The only people I can talk to with it fully tucked away are either those with mana as strong as yours, Sai, or the clergy of the Department of Divinities in Orient, since only people with magic can assume that role."

"There are very few mages, I see."

"Yep. That's why there's pretty much nobody who can look me in the eye. Plus, well... The veil's part of the ceremonial outfit of the divine emperor, and that's one of the reasons I wear it... Who told you about this?"

"The maids very kindly informed me last night."

"Ah, I see. Hey, what did you guys talk about?"

"Huh?"

Noting my hesitation, the emperor grinned mischievously. "Did you gossip about me?"

“...Somewhat, yes...”

He chuckled. “Okay. I’ll spare you the interrogation just in case.”

I shook my head vigorously. “We did not discuss anything that would sully your honor!” I wanted to change the topic, and I rifled through my head for ideas. “A-Ah, by the way, what did you eat last night?”

He hummed in thought. “Fish was on the menu.”

“Ah, it was the same for my table. It was delectable.”

“Oh, nice.” After a meaningful pause, he said, “So, that means you guys talked about something that makes you want to hide it from me, hm?”

My eyes widened, and I gaped in surprise. Eyes of ashen blue regarded me with twinkling amusement. A few moments later, the emperor burst out giggling. “I was just joking! You’re really bad at hiding things, Sai. You’re so cute.”

I fell silent. My cheeks were burning. *I need to get more used to communicating with people.*

Observing my statue-like stillness, the emperor continued to grin. “Your expression has finally relaxed a little. I’m glad.”

Realization dawned on me. He was trying to soothe my nervousness. I felt ashamed that he had to go so far for me, and the more I dwelled on my chagrin, the more my cheeks flushed. “I am so sorry... You are too kind to me...”

“I wouldn’t really call it kind, to be honest. I just have a lot of fun when I’m with you, Sai.”

“Really...?”

“I’ve always wanted to talk to you alone like this, after all.”

The emperor propped his elbow on the window frame, and the vibrant scenery rolling by illuminated his features with soft daylight. His glass earrings dazzled in the sun, and his eyes narrowed slightly against the glare. Completely relaxed, he contemplated the lush, green foliage floating past the window. He almost looked like a living, breathing, religious painting.

Wait, scratch that. He is a religion. He's the divine emperor, after all.

"Hm? Is there something wrong?" he asked.

"Please pardon me for my rudeness. I was taken with your magnificence for a moment."

"Really? Well, you can look at me as much as you want, Sai. In fact, I welcome it! Please engrave me in your memories so you can find me even if I get lost, okay?" He tilted his head, and even that small gesture seemed like the epitome of grace. "I...won't let you forget me again," he whispered.

On occasion, the emperor wore a very lonely look on his face—and it was my fault, because I had lost my memories of him. "No matter what happens from now on, I will never forget you, Your Majesty," I swore. "I am also sure that...I will definitely recall the memories I have lost one day."

He chuckled again, and a smile bloomed on his face, softening the corners of his ash-blue eyes. "I'm looking forward to it, then."

Yet again, I was sure that the game plot had been mistaken. How could such a person ever be treated as the Foolish Emperor? Based on what I'd heard from the maids the night before, at least, he was loved and held in high esteem by his people. And they didn't just praise his appearance either; they also viewed his policies very favorably.

In the first place, a beauty that awed his subjects was very appropriate for an object of worship. Even when he obscured his face with a veil, his dignity alone was enough to inspire voluntary reverence, and such an ability was probably necessary for an emperor descended from Amawashi.

Furthermore, the white silk and gold ornaments that adorned his person were masterpieces crafted with tasteful Oriental technique. His beauty, in itself, served the purpose of displaying the abundance and skill of his empire. As the emperor, he symbolized his entire nation, and as such, that he was a feast for the eyes was quite fitting.

Actually, maybe it's because he's so beautiful that the game didn't know what to do with him.

At any rate, I needed to express my gratitude to him. "Your Majesty... Thank

you very much.”

“Hm? What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Everyone from Orient has been very accommodating. I’m sure that I owe it to you, who made many arrangements far in advance to receive the Wagtail Priestess.”

“I haven’t done anything too significant.” A smile tugged delicately at his lips. “Even if I *did* lay the groundwork, if you weren’t so earnest a person, it wouldn’t have gone so well.” He paused. “Please take pride in yourself. Everyone likes you because you are who you are.”

I shook my head. “That is not the case at all. It was only possible because of your virtue, Your Majesty. In truth, it is beyond my position to have the honor of thanking you directly like this... I am aware of how precious and rare such an opportunity is, and I shall treat it as such.”

“You’re so formal and stiff.” He pouted a little. “I’m doing what I want to, so you can go ahead and lean on me, you know.”

At the sight of his reassuring smile, I felt a tender warmth creep into my heart. I pledged that I would, without fail, repay the Orient Empire somehow.

So... Is there anything I can do for His Majesty in Orient?

Even if I initially had my hands full in getting used to the new nation, I vowed to myself that I would invest my full efforts in becoming a valuable priestess so that one day, he would think my rescue had been worth it.

Occupied with my thoughts, I only noticed our change of destination after the carriage had strayed far off the main road.

Chapter Sixteen: The Emperor’s Rightful Power, *Misogiharae*

I realized we had deviated from our route when the large merchandise carts and itinerant merchants that had constantly crowded the highway throughout

our journey abruptly disappeared. Instead, we were advancing onto a narrower road that was more difficult to traverse; the path hadn't been fully serviced for vehicles, and the jolting of our carriage intensified, accompanied by a loud rattling. Green also began to supplant the scenery outside. It appeared that we were heading into a forest.

The emperor must have noticed that I was taken aback as I looked out the window. "Don't worry," he said. He seemed to be treating the change in plans as somewhat trivial. "We're just making a small detour."

"A detour... Did something happen?"

"Weeell... It seems that there's some stubborn snow that hasn't melted."

As we talked, the coach gradually slowed, eventually grinding to a stop. I could hear people disembarking in droves. Armor clanked and the crisp voices of men sounded. Military officials were exiting their carriages.

A baritone voice rang out. "Your Majesty." It was the General of the Left Wing, Lord Yukinari. His Princess-Kaguya-like black hair streaming behind him, he opened the door to our stagecoach. "The preparations are complete. Please proceed at your leisure."

The emperor hummed in acknowledgment. He lowered his veil and alighted from the carriage. He gently stroked the air with snow-white fingers, and a glistening, golden staff shimmered into existence. Grabbing it, he swiveled it through the air, and the ornaments hanging from its end made a tinkling sound as they grazed each other, like wind chimes in a cool breeze. The staff was similar in structure to a *khakkhara* and was probably used to channel one's magic. An embedded gemstone prism shone brilliantly in the light, painting tiny rainbows on the emperor's hair and clothes.

After warming up with his staff a little, the emperor turned to face me. "Actually, Sai."

"Y-Yes?"

"Would you care to join me?" He almost sounded as though he was inviting me on a stroll.

I nodded immediately. "I shall gladly take you up on that offer." No matter

our destination, if my emperor wished it, I would follow.

I trailed after him and Lord Yukinari, and eventually we came upon a line of military officers bearing large shields at the front of the column of carriages as if protecting us from something. They looked like a SWAT team preparing for a riot.

While we walked, the emperor asked for a report. “Have the nearby civilians been evacuated?”

“It has been done,” Lord Yukinari answered. “There have yet to be any casualties or property damage, but several traveling merchants and farmers have taken refuge in a neighboring village. A delay in the supply chain is likely unavoidable.”

“I see. Let’s end this quickly.”

Their pace was brisk. I would have expected anyone else in the emperor’s position to trip on the bottom of his robes, yet he handled himself skillfully and was speedier than I thought. Of course, being a general, Lord Yukinari was also swift on his feet. Both men were fast *and* tall, each of their strides long, and I fell behind in the blink of an eye. It was hard to believe that they could manage such a march in clothes that had to impart a certain air resistance. So that they didn’t truly outdistance me, I half ran after them.

In front of the line of military officers, a large mass of snow blocked the path. It was many times bigger than a human and probably the result of an avalanche. Spring was still only just stirring from the lull of winter, so snow wasn’t an uncommon sight. On our journey thus far, we had passed by many places yet buried, in fact.

However, the gigantic drift before us was abnormal—the pile was roughly the size of a four-story building. *How could this much snow fall on a main road at this time of year? And wait, His Majesty is going to clear it out? With...magic?*

I had no clue what was going on, but the situation was progressing nonetheless. The officers on the frontlines started to celebrate the moment they saw the emperor.

“Your Majesty! General of the Left Wing! We have been waiting for you!”

The emperor issued a command, the authority of a country's ruler in his voice as he demanded, "Everyone, keep your distance from me."

At that single sentence, the officers nimbly scattered in all directions. They appeared thrilled, eagerly anticipating what was to come. As they withdrew, what they had been guarding us against was revealed.

It really *was* snow after all. My former domain, the Cutrettola lands, was also located at high altitude, so I was accustomed to snowfall. And it was my experience with that clime that alerted me to the strangeness of the mass before my eyes. *How can there be such a large snowpack in the middle of this busy, flatland road?*

I wasn't left wondering for long. A length of the "snow" moved. A long neck rotated in a circle before the rest lumbered onto four legs.

My scream came out before I could think. "A-A dragon...?!"

The emperor turned. "Ah, is this your first time seeing one, Sai?" When I glimpsed his face through the gaps in his veil, I could see mirth lighting up his eyes.

"I-I never knew...these existed..." I stammered.

"Well, Centoria has a lot of people born with magic, so creatures like these probably don't spawn. These things are born when the ambient mana in nature reaches a certain threshold."

The emperor was acting as if stumbling upon a dragon was an everyday event, but faced with something I had never seen before, I was frozen in fear.

Ambient mana didn't cause problems as long as there were a lot of mages around to absorb it. Actually, in Centoria, we had so many mages that the excessive consumption and exhaustion of environmental mana was becoming a problem. But it seemed that the Orient Empire's dearth of mages meant that the ambient mana instead overflowed, molding into a new form... Or at least, that was my guess.

Lord Yukinari drew his sword in one smooth motion. "Please do not move from your spot, Lady Sai."

The dragon reacted to the glint of the blade. It swung its sharp claws of ice in our direction, toward Lord Yukinari.

I gasped, and a shadowy silhouette blurred into view in front of me—the general. He caught the beast’s blow with his sword, and with a thud, a sliced-off section of snow crumbled to the ground.

The emperor swirled his staff and broke into a run in the direction of the dragon, swift and nimble on his feet. With a hard tap against the ground with the tip of his staff, he leaped into the air, extending his large golden eagle wings. His jump as agile as a rabbit’s, he hopped into the air above the snow dragon and pointed his staff down at the creature.

His mouth opened. He spoke quickly and in a timbre that I couldn’t discern, weaving an invocation. The crackle of static electricity was like an accompanying orchestra as his staff glowed. Simultaneously, I saw Lord Yukinari’s hair float into the air in front of me—the emperor had erected a barrier. An all-encompassing dome of snow was trapping the dragon within.

The next moment, lightning wrapped around the emperor’s staff with the sound of a firecracker, and...

A series of thunderously loud bangs echoed in succession as though someone were beating heavily on a drum, and the ground shook with the impact. Inside the dome, the snow dragon fell apart with a deafening rumble, losing its shape as it reverted to snowpack.

Once again, the emperor rapidly chanted an incantation. What had once been a dragon whirled into pure, unadulterated snow inside the dome. It melted into water, then began to bubble as it boiled and gradually evaporated.

Raising his voice, the emperor trilled a final word, and the barrier thawed into nothing. There was a noisy splash as the snow disappeared in sync.

The emperor spread his golden eagle wings and unhurriedly descended to the ground. “Now then, let’s start the last harae,” he announced. White silk fluttered in the air, settling around him like a shawl with a surreal elegance as if from a scene out of a dream. He folded his wings and tapped the foot of his staff on the muddy earth with a harmonious jingle.

The lightning strike had left a crater. The emperor spun an archaic language into words of power, and the remaining water on the ground vanished at once. He walked forward. Slowly, he drew a line where the beast had been, purifying the area as he recited a poem in what was probably ancient Oriental.

I couldn't comprehend some of the vocabulary, and because the grammar was different from the modern language, there were several parts I had trouble deciphering. Yet I was able to understand the gist of it, somehow.

"Spring melts snow into water, and this water shall return to the sky and become snow once again," he intoned. It was a poem dedicated to the spirits of the land so that the cycle of nature could go on smoothly. He was speaking as Amawashi, and his litany was both prayer and demand.

Everyone was entranced by the poem, which wasn't too different from a pleasant song to our ears. I understood then why the officers had been so worked up about the emperor's arrival. Harae was a prayer to the gods to cleanse impurities and ward off calamities, and *misogi*, or misogiharae, was a type of harae, a purifying ritual done to purge oneself of innate sin. As one of those gods, the emperor was sanctifying the land, and to his people, the occasion was not unlike a sacred festival where he bestowed upon them the honor of witnessing his divinity.

The emperor increased the speed of his chant, and in a well-projected voice he uttered the poem again and again in a cheerful tempo. He spun his staff as though dancing and let it chime with every movement. His wings unfurled and stretched.

The scene was so magnificent that pleasant tingles raced down my spine. Every so often, I spied the emperor's expression through his veil. His eyes were sharp with focus, bewitching. His footwork and gestures entwined in a solemn dance.

I was in awe.



AND suddenly it was over. I snapped out of my daze to a commotion as the caravan prepared to resume its voyage. Lord Yukinari was calling out to me, dragging me back to reality.

“Lady Sai.”

“Lord Yukinari... I’m so sorry; I was a little out of it.”

“I believe that was the first harae you have ever seen. Were you surprised?”

“Yes...” Though some time had passed, I still felt as if my soul was outside my body, spirited away by the emperor’s performance.

The emperor wasn’t beside Lord Yukinari. Feeling like a lost child, I glanced around, searching for him. “Um, where is His Majesty...?”

A familiar voice said, “Behind you.”

“Wah!” I squawked.

The emperor looked down at me and grinned, flashing his canines as if he was having the time of his life. “Ahaha! I’ve never seen that look on your face before!” The solemn god was laughing without a care in the world.

I bowed my head deeply. “Thank you very much for showing me such an invaluable sight.”

“I’m glad you liked it. I really wanted to show you what I’m like when I’m cool, and it worked out in the end!”

An attendant approached at a small jog and offered new shoes to the emperor. What he was wearing had probably been sullied by snow and soil.

While the emperor changed his footwear, I took advantage of the opportunity and tugged on Lord Yukinari’s sleeve. He stooped beside me without a sound, and I whispered into his ear, “Will this have been detrimental to His Majesty’s health? He manipulated the weather heavily...”

Previously, just summoning a passing rain had caused his body to nearly go berserk. Yet there wasn’t even a bead of sweat on the emperor at present...

Lord Yukinari answered me in a low voice. “Within the bounds of Orient, he has the divine protection of the land. In any case, except in extenuating circumstances, he would never lose control.”

“I...see.”

The horrendous state the emperor had been in after my rescue had seared

itself into my memories like a bleeding scar, and I had trouble believing that he could summon lightning without batting an eyelash. *He is such a strong person... which means that he must have been weakened to the extreme back then...*

Lord Yukinari continued, “Birds have light bodies and ride the wind using the lift their flight feathers provide. His Majesty, however, flies with the body of a human. He manages his weight and the wind with his magic.”

I inhaled sharply in understanding. During the harae, the emperor had taken flight for only a brief period. He had used his staff to boost himself into the air after kicking off the ground with his feet. Thereafter he had remained airborne, and I couldn’t even imagine how much mana and stamina that had required.

When he saved me, he had flown from the capital of Centoria all the way to my demesne on the border. And he hadn’t been carrying his staff, which would have aided him in manipulating his mana.

“...It’s quite a distance from the capital to the Cutrettola lands, no wonder...”

“Do you recall the stained glass in the courtroom of the judiciary?”

“Yes.”

“His Majesty broke through that window headfirst before flying out... Sometimes His Majesty is too decisive. He will stop at nothing once he makes up his mind.”

I pictured the shocking scene. What my imagination pieced together probably wasn’t too far from reality. I fell silent.

Noting my response, Lord Yukinari said, “Lady Sai, there is no need for you to react in this way. The Orient Empire cannot turn a blind eye to the loss of the Wagtail Priestess. That is all.” And that was all he said before proceeding in the direction of his subordinates.

Almost as if to take the general’s place, the emperor reappeared in his new, clean shoes. “Sai, shall we get back into the carriage?”

“...Yes.”

The emperor was light on his feet as he walked back to our coach. The bottom hem of his outfit waved gently in the breeze along with the feathers of his

wings. He was beautiful. He was a beautiful man with an unquestionable strength who had nearly fallen apart back in that cave.

Our journey continued, and a week after we departed from the capital of Centoria, our carriages arrived in the capital of Orient.

Chapter Seventeen: The Sovereign of Spring, Beloved by Thunder and Graced with Golden Eagle Wings

A fortress wall surrounded the capital, and before we entered the city, the emperor had to move into the special ceremonial palanquin reserved for the Amawashi.

He left with a gentle smile. “See you later, Sai.”

The moment he alighted from the carriage and lowered the veil he had tucked under the ring of his crown, there was a shift in his eyes. Sharp. Lethal. Inhuman. His features almost looked like sculpture carved from the finest glass, and my heart skipped a beat.

Specialist court officials in uniforms dyed a greenish cerulean blue materialized, encircling him as they escorted him to the palanquin. He climbed in and sat, then was slowly carried into the capital, where his people waited. His veil and clothes of white silk swayed in the air like curtains on a stage. Just watching him from behind was enough to make me shudder in awe.

I also had to board a palanquin that had been specially prepared for the Wagtail Priestess. Relatively simple compared to the emperor’s, it was outfitted with sparsely spaced bamboo blinds that allowed onlookers to see into the interior. It was intended to draw the attention of the people around it.

“This is, um...” I said, faltering.

One of the priests transporting my palanquin answered my unspoken question. “Our people wish to celebrate the return of the Wagtail Priestess to the Orient Empire, and they eagerly await you with *sekka* in their arms! It would make their day if you smiled at them.” He seemed to be over the moon at

meeting the Wagtail Priestess as well and couldn't fully suppress his excitement.

Though I felt a little shy, such was my duty. I braced myself and clambered into the extravagant palanquin.

My eyes widened, a "Wow...!" escaping my lips. I was riding a palanquin for the first time in my life, and the view from the litter was very high. The priests bore me at a slow pace, carefully and gently, and I felt as though I were advancing through clouds.

The gates of the capital creaked open, and the first thing I saw was a main street that ran through the city in a straight line all the way to the imperial palace. The buildings along its length were roofed with burgundy tiles, the color a contrast to Centorian design. The roadside was packed with citizens, the people of Orient leaving no gaps in their wake.

"Your Majesty! Welcome back!"

"Your Majesty Emperor Haruka! Congratulations on your safe return!"

"Your Majesty!"

The crowd was orderly, maintaining a set distance from the procession as if separated by an invisible wall. They all stared with heated gazes at the emperor. Respect and adoration burned like fire in their eyes.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty!" they all bellowed as they began to scatter flowers toward us. The shower of blossoms was probably the sekka, part of a floral welcoming ceremony that doubled as a prayer. Though the blooms didn't land on us directly, the road, the sky—everything was painted with the colorful flowers. The sight was breathtaking.

The wind kindly carried the sweet scent of the flowers to me. *Haruka* literally meant "spring fruit," and the marvelous scene before me was the most wonderful blessing I could ever imagine. I was spellbound as I enjoyed the view, and when I casually looked around, I noticed the scrutiny of the masses had turned to me.

"Great Wagtail Priestess! Welcome to Orient!"

“Priestess, thank you for coming back to Orient!”

“Hurrah for the Wagtail Priestess!”

I swallowed. “Th-This is...”

Though the bamboo blinds divided us, I could sense many eyes on me as the people cheered. I knew it was quite late to have the thought, but I had only just realized that I might have plunged into something out of my league. I had assumed that in Orient I would lead the same life I always had, out of sight and low profile while dedicating myself to the emperor.

Mom... The title of Wagtail Priestess seems to have become something we never imagined...

The palanquin pressed forward, cutting across the heart of the city. A towering fort surrounded the palace, an enormous gate coated in maroon at the center. It swung open.

The emperor dismounted from his palanquin, and just before he passed through the gate, the fabric obscuring his appearance flew off him. A figure of impeccable white was exposed to the throng.

He spread his wings and reached out a hand to the citizens. Lightning flashed from his fingertips and surged toward the large city square. A beat later, a loud boom trembled the very ground.

There was a collective gasp. The sekka that had been sprinkled everywhere soared into the air with the force of the lightning, causing a flurry of flowers before it dispersed.

The crowd was going crazy. He was their divine god, the noble emperor who descended from the deity Amawashi. Above, numerous strips of cloth fluttered in the wind against clear azure skies. Government officials in gorgeous attire stood below. And cradled in the middle was the emperor with large wings and pristine white clothing, caressed by the breeze.

It was as if a painting had become reality.

“Beautiful...”

The moment I whispered that, a dark shadow slipped into the corner of my

mind: a vision of the emperor's last moments, which I had skipped countless times in my previous life. Actually, the background of that illustration had just so happened to be in a capital somewhere. In a spacious plaza, the Foolish Emperor, who had fled his office by sacrificing a scapegoat, had succumbed to death on the sword of a Holy Knight.

Though the sun was warm and dazzling, I felt a wintry chill down my spine.

For the sake of these people and His Majesty, I can't let it turn out like that. Never. Inside my palanquin, I tightened my hands into fists and vowed, *He must be happy. As the Wagtail Priestess, I'll do what I can to secure his future. Even someone like me should be useful for something.*

Third Arc: After Her Welcome, the Wagtail Priestess Becomes the Golden Eagle Emperor's Nightly Companion

Chapter Eighteen: Welcome to Orient, and Hello, Defective Stigmatized Property

THE structure of the city was very straightforward. The highway that we had traveled from Centoria stretched all the way to its center. And there, in the heart of the capital, was a tall rise of ground bounded by the Inner Fort, and on its crest sat the imperial palace.

Spread out below the palace complex, the city was split into several districts by deep moats, and canals lay like a network throughout the entire settlement. All of the bridges spanning the moats could be collapsed in an emergency.

Inside the Inner Fort, fosses and the fortress walls protected the imperial palace. Evidently, its builders had leveled what used to be the summit of the mountain and developed the land into an isolated plateau upon which the complex was constructed.

Hmm. A large main street, a city that expands around it in a circle, and a castle on elevated ground... If I consider just those elements and ignore the scale, it's somewhat comparable to the layout of Kanazawa, a city I visited in my previous life.

Several buildings comprised the imperial palace complex. First was Tenyoku Palace and the various government offices where all bureaucratic affairs were conducted. They were ancient structures, marked by a long history yet seemingly well-maintained. A sight to behold, they had been frequently repainted, and their roof tiles were in good condition.

Then, in the deepest recesses of the imperial complex was Kita Palace, the emperor's residence. And behind Kita Palace was another residence, partitioned from the rest of the grounds by moats. The only way to enter it was via the steeply arched bridge that connected it to Kita Palace. Yes, *that* was the former Inner Palace—the place in which I would dwell.

When shown the erstwhile Inner Palace, I discovered how inconvenient it was in both location and accessibility. *That makes sense. No wonder they had trouble repurposing it. Especially given the stigma attached to the name.*

The General of the Left Wing, Lord Yukinari, guided me inside. I trailed after him as we wound through the corridors of the Inner Palace.

“We have done the necessary cleaning and repairs in preparation for your stay, Lady Sai, but it is still lacking in many ways, such as furnishings. If there is anything you need, please request it whenever the occasion arises.”

“Thank you very much for being so accommodating.”

He had secured his knee-length hair with a tie behind his thighs, revealing his stern eyes. He had a detached air to him. During our tour, I had learned that Lord Yukinari had shared the same wet nurse as the emperor and that they were actually cousins. There was a significant contrast in their appearance, however. The emperor's features boasted a more androgynous charm while Lord Yukinari, despite his raven hair as long as Princess Kaguya's, had a chiseled face and sturdy frame befitting his role as a military officer.

My former fiancé also possessed a large stature, and his brawny, muscular physique was apparent to anyone who saw him. But Lord Yukinari's muscles had been trained to a purpose without even a shred of redundancy. His body was of substantial, durable build, not unlike a lethal predator's in the wild.

Lord Yukinari introduced me to the place while he led me down the twisting corridors. From a bird's-eye view, the structure of the Inner Palace was a little like a square donut with a square hole. It was a tall building with two floors, and the innermost section formed the quarters of the emperor's lawful consort. Many rooms with good views lined the outer edge of the palace. Overall, it was so big that it probably could have rivaled a respectable shopping mall.

Whereas general society and attire in Orient were analogous to that of Japan,

the architecture of the palace complex was more akin to what one would see in a high-budget Chinese historical drama. The more traditional or ancient something in Orient was, the more likely it was rooted in Chinese custom, which had diffused across the sea in-game as well. Meanwhile, the newer aspects and primary style of Orient were more like Japan.

I guess you could say that the game designers cherry-picked the best parts of two historical cultures in Japan and mixed them together. One is the more uniquely Japanese culture that arose in the Heian period, while the other was heavily influenced by the preceding Tang dynasty.

That aside, this place is huge... I know that maids and attendants will be living with me, yet being here all alone... It'll be lonely.

As I walked along the hall, I noted the inner atrium in the middle of the building. A pond occupied the spacious courtyard. Its water was murky, and I could see a group of teenage boys cleaning it with all their might. They looked like students. I could easily tell that the palace was no longer closed to men, despite its prior purpose.

“Lady Sai, please use the room that belonged to the lawful emperor consort.”

At Lord Yukinari’s direction, I opened the door, and through it I glimpsed a bedroom that practically exuded luxury from floor to ceiling. Subconsciously, I gulped. *I-I don’t think I’ll be able to fall asleep in this place...*

“Um... I am afraid that I am not worthy of this room.”

“It’s the room with the least damage. I am sure you will adapt quickly.”

That was all I got in reply before he ushered me to the next room. The baths were in an adjoining building. From the looks of it, the maids were a step ahead of us and already scrubbing them down.

“The bath water is from a natural hot spring. We have refurbished the kitchen. Other than that, there will be many janitors going in and out of the place for a while. I understand that may make you uneasy, but soldiers will be standing guard and patrolling the grounds all day.”

“Thank you.”

“Additionally, every location inside the former Inner Palace is within a web of magic. If anything happens, the invader’s neck will immediately part from their body, so please rest assured.” Lord Yukinari’s face was stern as he made a slicing motion across his neck with his hand.

I couldn’t stop my expression from stiffening. “Th-Thank you...” But then a thought occurred to me, and I couldn’t help but ask, “Lord Yukinari, are you a mage?”

“I am not.” He paused briefly before he continued, “Most of the mana used by the magical apparatuses in the royal complex are fueled either by the Department of Divinities’ mages or His Majesty himself. The magical apparatus in the Inner Palace uses His Majesty’s mana.”

“I see.” I scanned around me, concentrating on the mana that blanketed the area. *Yeah, it “smells” like His Majesty.*

“If you’re worried about the security here, you may create a new security system if you wish. However, please consult me beforehand. I would like to prevent innocent court officials from literally losing their heads in an accident.”

If possible, I would have preferred a security system that didn’t slice off people’s heads. I didn’t want to add another urban legend to the place. Though as the beneficiary of the court’s protection, I suspected such a request was inappropriate, so I kept quiet.

“I must say, this place is splendid. I find it difficult to imagine that it has been unoccupied for so long.”

I thought that sincerely. As the emperor had said, the repair work was pretty much completed, and the outward appearance of the bygone Inner Palace was magnificent. The walls were painted over with grayish blue plaster, and lavish, brand-new curtains adorned the windows. Drapery seamstresses had probably made them specially for my arrival—small wagtails were printed on the cloth, a clear sign that whoever had crafted them had an eye for detail.

Of course, I couldn’t deny the building’s flaws. Due to its long period of abandonment, the Inner Palace’s air was damp and had a slight stench. And as Lord Yukinari had mentioned, they had only furnished it enough for me to live there, so it felt a little desolate given how vast the entire palace was. Still,

considering what I had heard about the place beforehand, it was already a big improvement.

“Were the roof tiles and ornamental finials on the railings, as well as the decoration on the windows, left as they were before?” I asked.

“Do you wish to change them?”

I shook my head. “No. I was only admiring their craftsmanship. This place must have been lovely when it was still in use.”

Compared to the other, modest buildings in the imperial complex, overall, the Inner Palace placed more emphasis on the finer points of beauty and was filled with adorable designs of birds and flowers that usually appealed more to women. In the past, consorts must have dressed themselves in captivating finery, coming and going with their ladies-in-waiting in scenes like right out of a painting.

But the palace had been since deserted and had lost its exclusivity to women to boot, in effect reduced to a disorderly, vacant house. The thought was a little tragic. And above all, the hints of its former glory lent it an eerie atmosphere.

“Um, Lord Yukinari...” I trailed off.

“Yes.”

“One small room would be more than enough for my accommodation. You honestly don’t have to force yourselves to repair this place in a hurry.”

“That will not do. The good news regarding the return of the Wagtail Priestess has already spread throughout the country.”

“Ah... Yes, you are right...” I recalled the reception I experienced when I entered the country officially. The citizens had scattered vibrant sekka all around and welcomed me eagerly. Eagerly enough to make me feel a modicum of pressure, frankly.

“There will also be more maids and other staff in the future. If there are any other inconveniences, please report them, no matter how small.”

“...You are too kind.”

In my opinion, I didn’t deserve the impressive Inner Palace nor maids to serve

me. Yet the reclamation of the Wagtail Priestess from Centoria was a political maneuver in itself, so I couldn't protest just because I wished to decline due to my own reservations. And on a personal level, I wanted to cherish how considerate the emperor had been—he had gone out of his way to gather servants who were like trusted friends to me. For the time being, I decided that I would accept Orient's kindness gratefully.

"Besides, it would be rather disagreeable to live here were no repairs done. Especially since some of the rooms were vandalized when the court ladies rioted."

I was rendered speechless for a moment. "Excuse me, but were all the scuffles in the Inner Palace...of a physical nature?"

"The women gathered here were mostly daughters of military officers or merchants. Strong-willed, in other words."

So it wasn't malicious gossip or factions or subtle political games with their family honor at stake. It was literal fighting.

"If you are curious, would you like to see? We have already renovated the room that was damaged by arson, yet there might be traces of the unrest left behind."

"No, I'm fine, thank you... Ah, speaking of which—" I glanced at the freshly painted walls and changed the topic. "—the plaster here is grayish blue, I see. It is a wonderful color."

I had noticed something similar in the special rooms of the embassy in Centoria. Rooms reserved for guests, for example, had been coated in the same shade. In my eyes, it was both vivid and unusual.

"It's even better in winter." Although Lord Yukinari had been as stiff as a standard military officer our whole tour, the corners of his eyes suddenly seemed to soften a little. He appeared somewhat proud. "The color is even more pleasant against the snow."

I hesitated. "It is a little similar to the color of His Majesty's eyes."

"Is that how it looks to you?" He paused. "It is rather difficult for me to look directly at His Majesty's eyes."

My eyes widened. *That's right. His eyes are too blinding for people without mana.* "You have my apologies..." I said weakly.

"There is no need. You are one of the very few people in this empire who can observe the color of His Majesty's eyes without fear of consequence, Lady Sai. And due to his status, there are even fewer people with whom he can speak without reservation. If possible, I hope that you can be his good companion."

When Lord Yukinari talked about the emperor, a tenderness in his expression intimated the regard of someone more cousin than vassal. I could tell that he truly adored the emperor from the bottom of his heart, and my heart swelled.

"Certainly. I shall do my best."

Remembering something, Lord Yukinari muttered, "Oh. That reminds me. The matter of the court ladies is still a work in progress. There are also few remaining female attendants."

"That makes sense considering you have not had an operating Inner Palace, which means there was no demand." Nodding, I looked over to the youths that were still enthusiastically cleaning the courtyard. They all wore the same clothes. Uniforms, likely. "I saw female staff at the embassy back in Centoria but have yet to see any in the imperial court. The ones in the baths earlier were maids who relocated from the embassy... Are students taking care of the miscellaneous jobs here instead, as apprentices?"

"You have a sharp mind."

"I happen to have read about a similar type of cultural practice in literature."

Those who aimed to become bureaucrats started working in the palace as servants at a young age, getting a feel for the routine and etiquette on the job. A little like an apprentice page boy.

Actually, now that I think about it... The fact that maids and attendants are in short supply means that there aren't a lot of ladies of status living at court. I also haven't seen hide nor hair of the empress dowager either. There are still many things I don't know, it seems.

"In preparation for this occasion, we have gathered personnel by relocating the maids of the embassy and recalling the staff that once worked in the Inner

Palace, and we are also in the process of recruiting new blood. We will probably be inadequate in many ways until the system stabilizes. My apologies.”

“It’s no problem at all.”

In other words, my residence was to be the training ground for maids and ladies-in-waiting. When it came to international diplomacy, a male-dominated society wasn’t sufficient; the power of women also played a key part. The emperor likely wished to address that shortage.

“If my occupancy of the Inner Palace can provide jobs for attendants and maids, please use it as much as you wish.”

And I need to brace myself and carry myself with dignity as the mistress of this palace. I looked up at the former Inner Palace and hardened my resolve.

After I thanked Lord Yukinari, we parted ways, and I went in search of a late lunch. Given the circumstances surrounding the kitchen, I decided to dine in the student dormitory at the palace school, which was right next to Tenyoku Palace.

Chapter Nineteen: Did It Feel That Good, Your Majesty?

THE dining hall was empty and vast, not a single student in sight.

The chef went out of his way to greet me from the kitchen: “I haven’t served a lady since the Inner Palace was abolished! I hope you enjoy.”

My menu consisted of fried rice with finely chopped herbs and vegetable soup with a fish stock base. I was provided with roasted tea as well. The meal was quite different from what was served in Centoria since the cuisine there was based around bread and cheese. Oriental food was very gentle on my stomach.

I dined in a corner of the broad dining hall, the unique experience lifting my spirits. I headed to the kitchen afterward to express my gratitude.

“It was wonderful. Thank you.”

The chef was a little shy. “I’m glad to hear that. I don’t know much about the

food in Centoria, so I wasn't sure what dishes would satisfy you." He let out an audible sigh of relief.

"Oh, did you make this specially for me?"

"But of course! How could I ever give the great Wagtail Priestess the same food as the students?"

I hesitated. "If it isn't too much trouble, may I take a peek in the kitchen?" Curious, I asked him to give me a small tour.

He was quick to agree. "There isn't really anything worth your time, but I'd be happy to show you around..."

Inside were all kinds of pristine cookware, neatly arranged. Some were utterly foreign to me, while other implements I recognized. My overall impression was that in terms of cleanliness, the standard was stricter than in Centoria, and I guessed that it was because they often worked with very fresh ingredients. Compared to facilities that primarily handled preserved foods, a kitchen that dealt with fresh ingredients would naturally be more fastidious about hygiene.

For some reason, the large heap of used tea leaves caught my eye. The consumption rate was proportional to the number of students, so it was a sizable pile. "What will you do with this, may I ask?"

"We'll turn it into compost for the vegetable garden."

"...If possible, may I have some?"

"Are you sure? This is just waste."

"Yes, please. I just happened to need some."

I stuffed the tea leaves into a basket, which I carried in my arms as I returned to the Inner Palace. The students that had been cleaning the inner courtyard were no longer there.

"Okay," I muttered to myself. "For now, let's clear the odor and impurities from the hallways and the room I'm going to sleep in tonight..."

I'd timed my return well. The rock salt I had requested had been left in a narrow-mouthed pot next to the arch bridge. I transferred the ground salt into the basket of tea leaves and placed my palm over the mixture, infusing it with

my mana for a few seconds. Using magic, I enhanced its fragrance and its deodorizing effect. Buffing objects was easy compared to augmenting living creatures. I smelled it once I finished.

“Huh...?” It was *much* more fragrant than I had expected. “Maybe I infused it with too much magic...”

But then again, too much was better than too little. I canvassed the hallways, sprinkling the tea leaves. I made sure to peer into the vacant rooms too and placed more salt in the ones I thought were fishy.

Weird talismans had been stuck to the undersides of the carpets and behind mirrors, and I removed those as well. They only served the purpose of being creepy, after all. What I most wanted to avoid was frightening away the attendants and maids that would soon arrive. The urgent job at hand was to rid the palace of its “haunted house” ambience before they assembled.

After more or less completing my distribution of salt and tea leaves, I checked storage for cleaning tools. I was in luck; I found rags and brooms. I placed them together and used magic to fuse them into a mop.

“Hm...?” I raised an eyebrow as I inspected the mop I’d created from top to bottom. It was impressively sturdy, more so than I had anticipated. “Wait, don’t tell me...”

I grabbed some thread and wooden splinters that had been lying in the corner of the storage room. Again, I infused the odds and ends with my mana. With a light pop, another mop of the exact same appearance materialized.

I stared at it incredulously. *What? I was able to make the same item from splinters and throwaway thread! And I didn’t just stick them together in the shape of one—my magic even made up for the parts that were lacking to form a proper mop.*

I gazed at my hands, conviction in my eyes. “My mana really *has* increased.” And...I had an idea of why. “Did it feel *that* good, Your Majesty?”

The evening sun stroked my cheeks, snapping me out of my thoughts. If I continued to sink in my ocean of emotions, the sun was going to lose all patience and leave the sky. I melded the two mops together into one with a

wide, T-shaped head and began tackling the floors without delay. I wanted to enchant the building with my magic while cleaning, so I couldn't leave the task to the maids of Orient, who weren't accustomed to magic. *Let's finish this quickly before someone spots me.*

High-pitched squeals of friction echoed as I scrubbed the floor and gathered the tea leaves with the mop. As I progressed, the stale air inside the residence started to change. The main culprit behind properties that imparted an impending sense of dread was ambient mana that mingled with the lingering sentiments of humans before stagnating. The tea leaves, with their aroma elevated by magic, were working wonders on the musty stench unique to houses long deserted. And using the rock salt I had blended with the tea, I did a quick purification. The corroded mana was slowly clearing away. With the future in mind, I also enchanted the place with a spell that would prevent mold, so I didn't have to fear the rainy season.

"Phew!" I arrived back at my starting point and lightly wiped my sweaty forehead.

Once again, I surveyed the rooms, beginning to make mental plans for the facilities I wanted in the future. "It's spacious here, so it would be nice if I had a medicine storage room, a study, and a workshop. Back in the Order, they only allowed me to use a tiny corner of the room, so... Hmm, I wonder how many raw ingredients they're willing to provide me here."

The thoughts just kept rolling in, and my heart started to race at all the exciting possibilities. In my old home that had been, well, turned into a light show as it burned down, I had stored my precious collection: old books, materials for my apothecary craft, and tools essential for the secret arts of the Wagtail Priestess. Even if I didn't recreate it in its entirety, as long as I regained a decent portion of my collection, I would be able to make medicines of even higher quality than the ones I sold wholesale to the Order in Centoria.

I planned to inconspicuously produce compounds that wouldn't compete with the local apothecaries. Hopefully, someday, I could live off the proceeds. *Don't take your parents and what money you have for granted, as they say.*

"If ghosts show up or supernatural stuff happens, I can just deal with it as it

comes. Actually, if they are manifested ghosts, I could try communicating with them...”

Deep in thought, I walked out of the room. Then noticed a girl. On the arch bridge that connected the emperor’s residence to my place stood a girl around the age of twelve or thirteen.

Is she...a ghost? I shuddered but then immediately crossed that question out in my mind. She wasn’t a ghost. I could see her shadow on the stone bridge and her ponytail waving in the cool south wind.

She seemed to inhale, then—

“EXCUSE ME!”

—she screamed at a volume only possible for living, breathing humans. The magpie couple that had been frolicking in the inner courtyard fled off somewhere, their wings flapping noisily.

“My name is Suzuiro Ryuka! May I cross over?!”



Chapter Twenty: Suzuiro Ryuka, the Tiny Attendant with a Huge Voice!

SHE almost sounded like a head cheerleader given the manner of her greeting.

Hurriedly, I leaned the mop against the wall before walking across the gravel in the direction of the arch bridge. Like her name—Suzuiro—her hair was the color of tin, silvery white with a blue tint. Her crisp, thick eyebrows were charming, and she seemed around the age of a middle school student.

“Your name was Miss Suzuiro, right?” I stooped slightly to meet her eyes. “I am Sai, the mistress of this palace. May I ask what business you have with us today?”

The moment I gave her my name, Suzuiro’s eyes began to sparkle as if they contained showers of stars. “Lady Sai! I have come here to train as an attendant under the great Wagtail Priestess! Please take good care of me!”

My ears were in pain. I could hear rushed footsteps heading our way from inside the building, probably the maids.

I sucked in a deep breath. “Okay, shall we head in first?”

“Yes, my lady!”

“Pardon me, but why do you speak in such an...extremely loud voice...?”

Suzuiro puffed out her chest as she shouted, “Yes, my lady! I heard that the ghosts will stay away if I yell! Which is why I am hollering at the top of my lungs!”

I think it isn’t the ghosts who are going to disappear first, but my eardrums instead...



THE parlor had already been restored thanks to the maids. Tea was served.

Suzuiro’s entire body was tensed.

“Please help yourself. And if possible, relax a little,” I said in a placating voice.

She was sitting very stiffly, and her head grated toward me in a jagged motion. “Y-Yes, my lady! I-I never thought that I would suddenly have the opportunity to speak with the great Wagtail Priestess today, and, well, I... Ahhh...”

I almost started to feel a little nervous myself, watching her. “You mentioned earlier that you will be working as my attendant here, is that correct?”

“Yes, my lady! There are no dorms for us yet, so for the moment, I plan to live with my uncle, a court official, and come to perform my duties from there!”

“I-I see... That sounds rough...”

As our conversation went on, I learned that Suzuiro’s family owned an apothecary business. Ignoring the volume of her voice and judging from her lustrous hair, attire, and the elegance of her mannerisms, I suspected her family owned quite a wealthy company. Perhaps a position as a lady-in-waiting wasn’t her end goal. Her parents might have encouraged such an appointment so she could learn etiquette through apprenticeship similarly to the pages in the imperial court.

“I don’t really know the details of the job, but I am very happy that I have the honor of working under you, Wagtail Priestess!” Suzuiro was beaming at me.

After a pause, I asked, “Why do you like the Wagtail Priestess so much?”

The instant she processed my question, her big eyes lit up, twinkling. “Yes, my lady! At the girls’ school I went to, an illustrated book that depicted the myth of the Wagtail Priestess was really popular in my class! The tale was about how the awe-inspiring and kind priestess protected the Amawashi Emperor, who couldn’t get used to the world of humans, and...!”

The source of her admiration surprised me.

“Ah! Do you know about it too, Lady Sai?!”

I shook my head. “No... This is the first time I have heard about such works.”

“Oh, really! Your ancestor is the protagonist, Lady Sai, so I think you’ll like it! I have a copy at my place, I’ll bring it along some time!”

“Well, I wish to learn about what the girls like in this country, so... Please do.”

Ah. I see. Observing Suzuiro’s reaction, I discovered yet another calculated move on the emperor’s part. He had probably deliberately spread the name of the Wagtail Priestess through media that young girls favored. In my previous life, many boys entered kendo clubs because they grew up reading manga about swordsmen. The emperor had likely done something similar, gradually rooting the title of the Wagtail Priestess in everyone’s hearts beginning with youth entertainment.

Just how long ago did the emperor start caring about me...?

My thoughts were wandering aimlessly, and Suzuiro dragged me back to reality. She lowered her head quickly, saying, “But yes, it is just as I have explained, so please take care of me, Lady Sai!”

“I am afraid that I cannot assign the normal duties of an attendant to you at first. Is that all right? I only just moved in today, after all, so I will probably ask you to help with cleaning and tidying.”

“Of course! I am fully aware!” She nodded so hard that I was afraid she would break her neck. “I really wanted to meet you and couldn’t wait anymore, so I came earlier than planned!”

Ah. That’s why nobody told me beforehand.

She added, “Oh! And Father told me to ‘Go up there and steal all the secrets behind the priestess’s way of making medicine!’”

Her eyes were bright and honest. She didn’t know how to lie at all.

“I see.” I paused. “Once things have calmed down a bit, I shall teach you.”

“Yes, my lady!”

It was then that the loud yell of a youth echoed from the arch bridge at the entrance to the palace. “Lady Priestess! A Mr. Ryuka has a message for you!”

Suzuiro’s face lit up like the sunrise. “It must be my uncle! I am going to live with my uncle until the dorms are ready!”

A maid went out to inquire for further detail, and she reported that, apparently, Suzuiro’s uncle suddenly had urgent matters to attend to. He would

fetch Suzuiro later once he was done and asked that she stay at the Inner Palace past the evening bell.

“He sounds very busy. Thank you very much for passing on the message,” I told the maid. I saw her off, then started pondering our options. “Hmm... What should we do while waiting for your uncle?”

There wasn’t much available to kill time with. Even if I wanted to instruct her in medicine, none of the essentials was assembled yet. And...

“I shall help with cleaning!” she exclaimed.

...I couldn’t make her assist me with cleaning, despite her offer. She was a young girl without magic, and the thought that she might try to go around scrubbing the former Inner Palace made me sick with worry—I hadn’t finished exorcising the place yet. There could still be creepy talismans and bloodstains left. She was just a trainee, and it would be terrible if I scared her away so soon into her service to the Wagtail Priestess.

“That being said...” I muttered to myself. *The only places furnished and ready are the bare-minimum facilities such as the kitchen and bedrooms, so—* “Wait.”

I turned to face Suzuiro. “May I ask for your company to the baths?”



PERSONALLY, what delighted me the most about my new residence was the hot spring that fed the baths. I had learned at the embassy that the bath culture of the Orient Empire was very similar to the Japanese tradition in my previous life.

A belt of volcanoes in the center of the continent divided Centoria and Orient, and presumably due to those volcanoes, Orient boasted countless hot springs. And while Centoria was more into saunas than bathing, in Orient, which abounded with water sources, hot springs were a very integral part of citizens’ lives, including those of commoners. Not just the Inner Palace had large baths; there was even a big public bath on palace grounds for lower-ranked court officials. It was part of their employee benefits.

A dream come true.

I addressed one of the maids preparing dinner in the kitchen. “Are the baths ready for use?”

She replied in the affirmative. “Of course. I shall procure a change of clothes as well.”

Chapter Twenty-One: The Hot Spring and Suzuiro

I headed toward the baths with Suzuiro following behind, a cheerful spring in her step.

“What are the baths like?” she asked.

“To tell you the truth, it’s my first time there too. That is why I wanted you to come with me, Miss Suzuiro.”

“Understood, my lady! Woohoo!”

Stone steps stretched from along one side of the empress consort’s room and led to a detached, windowless bathhouse, also of stone. We stopped near the entrance, marveling at it from the outside. The overlook was grand; I could even vaguely make out the sea in the distance.

“A fantastic view...” I sighed.

We entered the bathing area. Hot water gushed noisily, and I scooped some up with my hand. It had a silky, viscous consistency and was as clear as spring water could get. The hot spring was definitely one of the finest I could ever dream of.

I lifted my head to the cypress walls. It was a shame that they hid the breathtaking sight outside.

“Actually...” I placed my hand against one of the walls and poured in my mana. Crackles of static electricity fizzed before all the walls turned invisible in an instant.

A singsong voice echoed out, “Laaady Sai! Your Suzuiro is coming i— AHHH!” Suzuiro, who had come in after me, screamed at the exposed scenery. “What is

going on?! We're in plain view from the outside! That's so improper!" she cried, panicking.

"Please calm down, Miss Suzuiro." I pointed outside. "I suggest you step out for a moment and try looking in."

"Yes, my lady!" She ran out swiftly like a gust of wind.

After a short wait, Suzuiro appeared in front of the wall. She glanced around restlessly. When I waved my hand, she didn't notice. Soon she returned, bouncing and blabbering in excitement. "Looking in from the outside, there are no windows! How does it work?! Is this magic?!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. Miss Suzuiro, please come over here."

I took off my shoes and walked into the bathroom barefoot. Reaching my hand toward where the wall was supposed to be, I could feel a solid object. Though the baths resembled an open-air hot spring, the walls were still very much present.

Suzuiro placed her hands against the invisible barrier, a puzzled expression on her face. "Huh? There's...a wall here, right? That's so strange..."

"I enchanted it so we can look out from inside but not the other way around. After all, why waste the gorgeous view if I have a say about it? Shall we enjoy it together?"

"A...Amazing..." Her eyes were wide with excitement as she gazed outside. "Magic can do things like this, huh...?"

"Is it rare to come across magic in this country?"

Still dazed, Suzuiro nodded. "Yes. Ah, but the lanterns in the plazas and the streetlamps along roads contain undying flames that are fueled by magic. And there are special devices enchanted with magic to remove snow piled on houses in winter! I've seen these before!"

It seemed that although Orient had very proactively introduced magic into public infrastructure, the average citizen rarely came across it in their personal life. In Centoria, individuals could indulge freely in spellcasting since many of us had mana, so conversely, magic wasn't really involved in civil engineering.

There, magic was purely the power of a person, their own way of breezing through life. Orient, evidently, was the opposite: because mages weren't as abundant, the few who did possess magic were probably expected to use it for the greater good.

...Maybe I should use my magic only in places away from prying eyes, unless it's a special occasion. Case by case, I'll learn the rules and conventions of this country at my own pace, I thought as I left the bathroom. I turned back to Suzuiro, whose mind remained in the clouds while she stroked the walls.

"Let us hurry and enjoy a good soak, Miss Suzuiro."

"Yes, my lady!"

She trailed after me energetically, almost like a puppy.



TO bask in a hot spring under the sun was an exceptional experience.

"Lady Sai! I shall wash your back!"

"Thanks. I am counting on you, then."

"Yes, my lady! Is this all right?!"

I let out a small squeal. "Um! I... S-Sorry, Miss Suzuiro, I think I will do it myself."

"Ah! I'm so sorry, I'm terrible at this...!"

"No, it's not any fault of yours... I am just unused to people touching me. I'm fine when I initiate contact myself, but..."

"Huh?" Suzuiro, whose long hair was tied up in a bun, stared at me in puzzlement. She held a piece of white cloth that foamed with soap.

I digress, but there's one thing for which I'm very thankful. In terms of hygiene, Orient's practices are very similar to Japan's. I am so glad that I was reincarnated into a world with a plot written for a female audience, which highly regards the matter of cleanliness. Gratitude welled up from the bottom of my heart. I didn't have to worry about poor sanitation or health standards.

I knew that my memories of my previous life were just that—a previous life.

But once I recalled washing myself in a bathroom and wearing clean clothes every day, there was no way they couldn't influence my judgment.

"Wait. You are the great Wagtail Priestess, and no maids attended you during your baths?"

"Yes." I smiled wryly. "I have lived a much more mundane life than you probably imagine, Miss Suzuiro."

"I see... That's surprising... Ah! But that makes sense!" A lightbulb seemed to light over Suzuiro's head. "Everyone would have reservations about touching you out of reverence, Lady Priestess!"

"Weeell... That is not really the case..." *I was usually the one who washed others' backs, rather than the reverse.*

...But it was probably better if I didn't tell her. In my conversations with Suzuiro, I had found myself shocked by how intensely the empire pedestaled the Wagtail Priestess. In my homeland, the priestess's line was essentially considered a rural and—albeit historied—eccentric noble clan. Furthermore, the only people who respected our history were scholars or devout believers, a very small portion of the population.

I thought back to Orient's feverish welcome of the emperor. In a way, he was my patron, and his regard for me would likely continue to help me in the future. *I need to get a grip and work hard.*

We sank into the hot spring together, and Suzuiro practically melted with a sigh of contentment. "Ish shooo niiice..."

The water was a little on the hotter side and very pleasant. A good soak accompanied by the sight of the sunset gradually dyeing the sky different hues was amazing. I had been tense for a long while and could feel the stress leaving my body bit by bit.

I sighed in relief, then noticed Suzuiro staring with sparkly eyes from beside me. "Hm? May I help you?"

"My lady! I was just thinking about what my father said! He was joking after all!"

“By that, you mean...?” I tilted my head in question.

Animatedly, she replied, “Father told me a bunch of stuff about the Wagtail Priestess, and he said that you have wings just like His Majesty, among other things!”

“...Oh.”

“You don’t have wagtail wings, I see!”

“Scions of birds and beasts.”

I was reminded of my former fiancé’s scathing words, and my heart skipped a beat.

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Command to Be His “Nightly Companion”

I still remembered what that man said the day he lashed out at me in the embassy.

“You saw it yourself when he kidnapped you! Those wings of his are the true nature of that beast you call emperor! Humans gathered around the king of Centoria, a genuine human, while the scions of birds and beasts settled in the east, from which they protected Centoria. That is true, unadulterated history, recorded even in the Myth of Beginning. You call yourself a priestess but can’t even memorize that much? Hah!”

Just the memory of it was enough to make my anger boil like magma and churn my stomach. The man hadn’t stopped at turning a deaf ear to my words or pinning a crime I wasn’t responsible for on my head. He had spouted such filth in the Oriental Embassy of all places, and thinking about it caused an indescribable fury to well up within me—an emotion I hadn’t felt even when framed.

Ah... In the face of those old feelings, I suddenly realized something. Back then, I remembered an emotion that I had forgotten long ago... What it is like to

feel anger.

“Um, Lady Sai?” asked Suzuiro slightly worriedly.

With a start, I was dragged back to the present, and I saw her big eyes staring at me.

She continued, “Sorry, did your Suzuiro say something that offended you?”

“Not at all, it is a different matter.” I shook my head, apologetic that I had worried her, then smiled. “I just remembered something completely different...”

“Ah, okay! Pheeew!” Suzuiro grinned as if nothing had happened. She was a carefree girl, and I was grateful for that. “By the way, Lady Sai, your back is so pretty.”

“You think so...?” I couldn’t see it myself, so I wasn’t too sure.

After a pause, Suzuiro said, “In Orient, legend says that the sacred and the noble have wings.”

There was only goodwill in her eyes as she looked meaningfully at my back. Whenever she wore such an adultlike expression, the beauty of her features suddenly seemed more prominent. Her lips were petite, her eyes large, and her innocent face reminded me of a kitten.

She explained, “Until I met you, Lady Sai, I assumed for the longest time that the current living Wagtail Priestess would have beautiful wagtail wings.”

“I am sorry, but I do not. I really am just an average human.”

“No, not at all!” A soft smile warmed the beautiful young woman’s countenance. Perhaps she’d soaked in the hot water for a little too long, because her face was a little flushed. “Just between you and me, I was a little relieved. If you had wings, I wouldn’t know how to wash your back, I think. And I even have the honor of sharing a bath with you!”

“I see... I’m glad that I did not let you down.” I felt my own lips stretching into a gentle smile at her earnest words of affection. *Let’s not think too much about it. I’ll accept her kindness as it is.* “Thanks, Miss Suzuiro. I am still inexperienced in many ways, but please take care of me from now on.”

I returned her smile awkwardly, and that was enough for vibrant elation to light up her face. If she were a puppy, I bet she would be wagging her imaginary tail so hard.

Suzuiro stood up with a splash and declared energetically, “Yes! Of course!”

She wobbled. It wasn’t just her face that was red—it was her whole body.

My eyes widened. “Wha...” But my realization had come too late. “M-Miss Suzuiro!”

She toppled toward the stone ground, and I hurriedly caught her with arms enhanced by magic.



SUZUIRO sounded as if she was on the verge of tears. “L-Lady Sai... I am so sorry...!”

“It’s all right. You were probably nervous. I am glad you didn’t get hurt.”

A maid and I were fanning Suzuiro. Suzuiro, who had become lightheaded from being in the bath for too long, was limply lying on a chair in the well-ventilated inner atrium. Thanks to the students who had tidied it up at noon, a pleasant evening wind was blowing across the courtyard without obstruction.

An exasperated sigh came from beside us. “Seriously...”

It was Suzuiro’s uncle, who had clapped a hand against his forehead. Apparently he was the only member of the wealthy, mercantile Ryuka family who had passed the exams to become a court bureaucrat, which was his current occupation. Although he was Suzuiro’s uncle, because she was only thirteen, he appeared to be in his early twenties. He had come to the arch bridge to fetch Suzuiro, and I had led him to the courtyard, where he’d seen his niece in her flaccid state.

Suzuiro responded with a weak whimper.

Mr. Ryuka got onto his knees. “My deepest apologies, Lady Priestess. I do not know how I can ever atone for her presumptuous actions.”

Hurriedly, I asked him to rise. “That is not the case at all. I was raised in Centoria and am not used to the bathing practices here. Your niece was

considerate to stay by my side. Please, I ask that you do not blame her if possible.”

“Lady Priestess... You are too generous to our little fool. Thank you very much.”

I could feel Suzuiro’s heated gaze on me. I was only speaking the truth—it had been an oversight on my part to not take Suzuiro’s nervousness into account. I turned to face her. “We will be together for the foreseeable future, and I am sure that I will slowly adapt to the culture of Orient. Miss Suzuiro, please take care of me from now on, okay?”

“Yes, my lady...!” she replied, sitting up with fervor.

“Wait, if you get up that suddenly...”

She gasped in realization, then, as expected, flopped back down with a mewl.

Mr. Ryuka placed a hand against his forehead once again and let out another long, long sigh. “I can never apologize enough, Lady Priestess... Our family *told* her that being a court attendant was out of the question for a fool such as she, but...this child’s father exclaimed, ‘You never know until you try!’ and, well, he had the final say...”

I shook my head. “You really do not have to apologize. I am elated that my first attendant is Miss Suzuiro.” With a tiny smile, I added, “She puts her best effort into everything. She is a very good girl.”

“This munchkin may be lacking sense, but... She is a good student, motivated, and very diligent, so she is by no means a bad girl...”

“Yes, I could tell. Though but a day has passed, your niece has already taught me many things about Oriental culture.”

“Is that so, my lady?” Though Mr. Ryuka was acting rather reserved, I could see the relief on his face after I praised his niece.

I took that as an opportunity to greet him properly as well. “I am still adapting and may be lacking in many ways, so I would be very happy if you could teach me along the way, Mr. Ryuka.”

“B-But of course!”

Suzuiro, meanwhile, was desperately trying to hide the grin sneaking onto her face. *She's so cute. I'm glad that such a good girl is going to be my trainee attendant.*



“**WELL** then, Lady Sai, see you tomorrow!”

“Ugh, you little imbecile, face forward!”

Mr. Ryuka dragged Suzuiro by the hand as they left together, and I watched their retreating backs with happiness dancing in my heart. “To have a warm family must be so nice.”

On a whim, I glanced up at the sky and realized that it had grown dark. “Okay, I need to do some more tidying and think about when I should sleep...” Still on the arch bridge, I had turned to head back to the former Inner Palace when—

“Lady Sai.”

—a baritone voice with which I had gotten very familiar in the past few days called my name.

I turned around, and there, on the arch bridge where Suzuiro had been moments before, stood Lord Yukinari. He was alone, and he held a lantern in one hand. Its light brightly illuminated his face, his sharp, stoic blue eyes glinting. His long, raven hair fluttered in the wind that blew over the moat, and it was almost as if somebody had snipped the night’s darkness into long strips.

The mood abruptly changed with his appearance.

“Lord Yukinari, may I help you?”

“His Majesty requests your presence tonight.”

My heart stuttered. “His Majesty did...? Tonight?”

He nodded. “He wishes for you, the Wagtail Priestess, to attend him in bed.”

Chapter Twenty-Three: His Nightly Companion—Behind the Curtains, the Emperor Waits for His Wagtail

THE sun had long bid farewell to the world, plunging it into night.

Lord Yukinari crossed the arch bridge alone with a lantern in hand. The light of the moon and the lantern reflected off the surface of the moat like scattered gemstones. His outfit was the color of lapis lazuli and reminded me of hanfu. He cut a fine figure against the enchanting backdrop as he approached.

“It is time to leave,” he said simply before turning to depart again. I followed him at a small distance as we headed toward our destination, the Kita Palace—toward the emperor’s bedchamber.

“My apologies for making you come all the way here. This place is in a rather removed corner of the Inner Fort...”

“Not an issue.” His reply was short and clipped. “The generals of the Imperial Division, who answer directly to the emperor, take turns to patrol at night. That role happened to be mine tonight. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Thank you.”

His black hair, tied near the end of his locks, swayed with his every movement. I gazed at it, thankful for Lord Yukinari’s thoughtfulness in both his actions and words. Although he seemed somewhat detached when he spoke, he was a person whose considerate nature seeped through every detail. His was an important position, the office of the General of the Left Wing; he shouldn’t have been obliged to personally guide my tour of the former Inner Palace, or contact me earlier in the evening about the emperor’s summons, or even come to escort me. His subordinates would have sufficed.

“We are heading onto gravel. Watch your feet.”

“I will, thank you.”

Though he continued to face forward, he went out of his way to warn me about such things. And while he appeared to be walking at a brisk pace, he was deliberately shortening his strides to match my speed. He was a gentleman to the extreme.

Perhaps that kind of care and eye for detail was only normal for a general

right below the emperor. *I truly shouldn't have expected anything less than the best.*

"Um, Lord Yukinari..."

"Yes."

I hesitated. "Are you possibly a married man?"

For the first time that night, Lord Yukinari stopped in his tracks. He turned to look at me in surprise. "Why do you think so?"

"Well, you know what to be attentive to, and you also seem to be used to escorting women."

"...You have a keen eye." His own eyes seemed to soften with the ghost of a smile before he resumed advancing forward. "I have a wife and two children—one son, one daughter."

"Ah, I see... That confirms a small suspicion I had in the back of my mind."

After a beat of silence, he asked, "Do I seem that much like a domestic man?"

"Oh, no, that is not what I am trying to say."

"I was joking." There was a lightness in his voice. Though he looked somewhat strict and stern, he was perhaps more approachable than I had thought.

As we wound through the imperial grounds, I let out a small sigh of wonder. "Wow..."

Not just Kita Palace but the entire imperial complex was brightly lit. Lamps flickering with the same eternal flames as Lord Yukinari's lantern were suspended from the overhangs of buildings, providing a light source no matter the time of day. *Wouldn't that be a fire hazard?*

"There are a lot of light sources with undying flames in the city," I noted.

"Not flames but His Majesty's lightning."

That wasn't the reply I was expecting.

He clarified, "His Majesty enchants bamboo charcoal with lightning magic, and we surround it with glass to make lanterns. When damaged, the magic will dispel, so there's no danger of fire. There is the rare occasion when one stops

emitting light due to eventual deterioration, at which point His Majesty repairs it.”

In other words, they weren’t too different from incandescent light bulbs. The bamboo charcoal acted as the wire filament, and the emperor supplied the electric current with his mana.

I paused momentarily to admire the night scenery, just briefly enough that I wasn’t left behind. “So, this is the brilliance of the emperor...”

The capital looked as if somebody had whimsically scattered stars across the city to mirror the twinkling night sky—a demonstration of the power of the living god who ruled the country.



KITA Palace was more extensive than the Inner Palace and had high, lofty ceilings. A sweet, musky scent wafted up from the floor and filled the air. In the corridors, military officers stood guard at regular intervals like guardian statues.

After many twists and turns through the long hallways, we found ourselves at a doorway spanned by lavish drapery that obscured the view behind it. Lord Yukinari halted abruptly. Wordlessly, he looked at me and indicated for me to enter with a flick of his eyes.

I took a deep breath. “Your Majesty, it is Sai. I am coming in.”

Through the many layers of silk curtains, I could vaguely make out a canopy bed. I stepped inside, lifting each fold of fabric in turn. Lamps dotted the room and, crackling slightly from time to time, illuminated the chamber with a mild, ambient glow.

Past the translucent silk, I could see several pure-white sheets piled atop the bed. The wings of a golden eagle were fully outstretched above, almost like a structural decoration adorning the bed. I finally lifted the last curtain and was greeted with the sweet fragrance of the emperor.

“Sai, over here.”

The emperor propped his elbow on a pillow. He lay in a relaxed manner on his side, lethargic and languid as a feline. He was wrapped in multiple layers of

white, thin sleepwear and had removed his earrings and other accessories. He looked at home.

His wings, which were longer than he was tall, rustled as if in welcome, creating a small breeze.

“Come,” he murmured in a smooth, husky voice. He patted his bed twice, beckoning me.

For a moment, my mind froze. “Your Majesty... I am afraid to say that I have qualms about sitting there.”

“Why not sit here?”

He had me at that question. I didn’t have a reason to refuse his command.

“I asked for you to attend me in bed, right? Well, you can’t really keep me company when you’re that far away.”

“...Please pardon my intrusion, then.”

I couldn’t go against the emperor. Pushing the silk a little further aside, I entered the room and sat on the bed.

The emperor’s beautiful ash-blue eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of me, a certain tenderness in them. “Sai.”

It was warm inside the canopy—as warm as a human body. It was almost as if I were feeling his heat directly against my skin.

“You must be pretty tired after today,” he remarked.

“Not at all. It was a stimulating and enjoyable day that went by in a flash.”

“Really?” The corners of his eyes softened gently. “I’m glad to hear that. If you ever encounter any trouble, make sure to tell me immediately, okay?”



Up close, his kind features were even more captivating. I had to stop myself from staring at him in a daze, so I straightened my back and forced myself to focus. “Your Majesty, do you often summon your subjects to your room?”

“No way.”

I had thought briefly that perhaps our proximity was the norm in Orient, yet evidently I was wrong after all. The emperor appeared amused as he shifted the big pillow supporting his elbow. He seemed to be in a good mood.

“Then...why did you summon me tonight?”

“Well, about that... I wanted to talk about something in private, and...I also have a request.” He placed a finger against his lips, then mumbled, “Okay, let’s start with this first... Can you tell me what kind of abilities the Wagtail Priestess has? I’ve been having trouble with that.”

“May I ask for you to elaborate?”

“Even in the historical records dating back to when the Cutrettola lands used to be a part of Orient as the Sekirei Prefecture, the unique powers of the Wagtail Priestess have never been documented. Your ancestors must have been adept at hiding them.”

I at last understood why he had called me there. We had only just arrived in Orient, and the most immediate place we could talk without fear of prying ears was his bedroom. *I see. That’s why he called it “attending him in bed.” I am literally keeping him company as a conversation companion.*

“This is just my theory, but...” The emperor crossed his legs, speaking in a relaxed manner. “The power that you used to heal me, those special words... Through them, you remove the magic resistance of your target so that your spells can affect their mana with the most efficiency possible. That’s the unique power of the Wagtail Priestess, am I right?”

At his question, I bowed once before answering, “Yes, it is exactly as you say, Your Majesty. Please allow me to expand on the details. The words of power that the Wagtail Priestess uses completely strip a body of its magic resistance. To put it simply, if I were to apply a hundred units of mana, none would be wasted due to resistance, and my target would experience the full effect of that

hundred units of mana.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: His Nightly Companion— Explaining What It Means to Be the Wagtail Priestess

THE emperor had just requested that I tell him about the unique powers of the Wagtail Priestess, and I gave him a formal bow before complying.

First, some background and definitions. When using magic or casting a spell, a mage was utilizing their innate mana to affect a target in some way, whether it be a live organism or a nonliving object.

Magic was more effective against nonliving things, which didn't have consciousnesses. In contrast, when used on people or organisms with a sense of identity, spells encountered resistance. Consequently, healing and buffing magic naturally suffered some inefficiency. Even when mages skilled enough to be on par with members of the Order of Holy Knights poured a hundred units of mana into such a spell, the net effect was only around the worth of thirty to forty units of mana.

In some more specific examples, a mage might provide enough mana to heal a fractured bone, yet the only observed outcome would be an alleviation of the injured person's pain. A mage's attempt to heal a graze would merely speed up the recovery process enough for the wound to scab over.

That was the best that magic could do when used to directly influence a living organism. Not to mention that among mages, less than ten percent could wield their mana to heal or enhance, so the ability was precious indeed.

Therefore, potions, which were made by infusing nonliving ingredients with magic, were the go-to choice for the general population. And for the above reasons, doctors still existed despite the presence of magic.

But the ability of the Wagtail Priestess could bend and even subvert all those laws of nature, almost like a cheat code in a game.

“The words of power that the Wagtail Priestess uses completely strip a body

of its magic resistance. To put it simply, if I were to apply a hundred units of mana, none would be wasted due to resistance, and my target would experience the full effect of that hundred units of mana.”

The Wagtail Priestess already possessed an extraordinary amount of mana in the first place, which, coupled with the ability to remove magic resistance, well... *I doubt I have to explain how powerful that combo is.*

“So, it’s like my misogynharae poems?”

I nodded. “I believe so. They probably share similar principles.”

When the emperor purified the snow dragon, he had recited a poem to amplify and augment his magic. The overall effect wasn’t too different.

“It all makes sense now. I can see why the special powers of the Wagtail Priestess weren’t made known to the public. It would be dangerous if that kind of news got out.”

“Yes... For generations, the governors of the Cutrettola lands, the Wagtail Priestesses, have taken great pains to keep our powers under wraps while passing the ability and our domain down matrilineally from mother to daughter.”

“I get that... If you want to protect yourself while keeping your tradition alive, hiding your strength is the wisest choice. Well... That’s also why the title became a footnote in history and why Orient relinquished Sekirei Prefecture to Centoria.” He smiled wryly. “And that’s despite the fact that all of you priestesses are associated with the Myth of Beginning! The fault is definitely with my empire, not you.”

I hesitated. “Well, there were probably extenuating circumstances at the time...”

“Okay, that aside... There are requirements for your powers, right?”

I nodded and held up two fingers. “The first is that I must use the real name of my target.”

“Ah, I see. That was why you called me by name back then.”

“You have my deepest apologies... I can never make up for that crime of

sacrilege.”

“Don’t say that.” He paused. “I was happy. I rarely get called by my name due to my status.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief. “Thank you very much for your compassionate words.”

The emperor brushed aside his silky, ivory-white hair with his hand and looked up at me from his reclining position. “And? What’s the second?”

“The second is that I need to channel my magic with good intention and devotion; I mustn’t have any intent to harm.”

“No intent to harm... But good intention and devotion?” He blinked eyes of ashen blue, mulling over my words. “So... As long as you’re doing it with ‘good will,’ you can do *anything* to your target?”

“Yes. As long as I consider it ‘good will.’”

“...Absolutely anything?”

“I can heal. I can brainwash. I could also destroy their bodies.”

“That definitely sounds like a power you have to be careful with.”

“Well, naturally, the mana expenditure is hefty in exchange, but... Many things considered ‘impossible’ by normal mages are within the realm of possibility for me.”

I glanced down at my palms. My mother, the previous Wagtail Priestess, had been rigorous in her education. She had disciplined me in the dangers I posed and had hammered healthy morals into me.

“I think I know why you take everything so seriously now, Sai. You’re strong, and because of that, you impose responsibility upon yourself.”

I shook my head. “I still have a lot to learn. I need to study even more diligently.” Then, returning to the topic at hand, I continued, “Originally, the power of the Wagtail Priestess was bestowed upon my clan by divine will as a tool we can use to aid the deity Amawashi, a being beyond the realm of human understanding. The requirement that a priestess can only use her power with good will was probably intended to ensure a balance between humans and the

godly Amawashi.”

The emperor shrugged. “I’m honestly in awe of the determination of the Wagtail Priestesses. All of you hid your powers so thoroughly, with so much self-control, that you even ended up leaving the territory of the Amawashi...”

I was happy that our deity had praised us all, my ancestors included. I bowed my head. “A part of the reason we kept such a low profile was because we did not want information about such dangerous powers to become public knowledge and get into the wrong hands, yes, but, more than anything...” I faltered.

“What is it?”

“...It was probably because if people found out, we would be in danger as well.”

Though the Wagtail Priestesses had special abilities, in the end, we did not come from a powerful political background. We were but governors of a remote demesne, so our influence was practically negligible, and our magical power far exceeded the station of women in such a position. That was why I had followed in the footsteps of my forebears and hidden my true capabilities from the Order.

“You make a good point. If someone in a position of influence commanded you to use your magic and you ended up failing, that wouldn’t end well for you guys. Times have changed, after all. Unlike in the ancient days when the priestess was significant in upper society, if a mere countryside governor declared that she can’t follow an order because it’s not in good faith, weell...”

“Yes. Which is why past priestesses have devoted themselves to the study of medicine to further throw people off the trail.”

He nodded to himself, satisfied with that explanation. “I see. So that’s why the Wagtail Priestesses are talented in languages and keep coming up with original medicines, huh?”

Then he changed the subject. “Hey, Sai...”

“Yes?”

“...Aren’t you tired from all this talking?”

It was rather sudden.

“No, I’m fine.” I shook my head.

The emperor let out a groan as he stretched, his wings extending with a rustle. “I’m tired after all that serious stuff. Do you want a late-night snack? How about I get someone to fetch us some liquor?”

“Wha—” I gaped at him like a goldfish.

Merrily, the emperor moved to clap his hands and summon a servant, and I hurriedly shook my head in refusal.

Chapter Twenty-Five: His Nightly Companion—Do You Want Me to Melt You in My Hands, My Emperor?

“**HUH?** No, um... I do not really need... I only came here to offer explanations, so please, go ahead and enjoy your supper without me...!”

“To attend me in bed.” The emperor emphasized the words as if to remind me. “You came here to keep me company, right? So a few snacks to munch on would be very appropriate for the occasion, don’t you think?”

“W-Well... Yes, Your Majesty...” I couldn’t outright refuse him. “Then... I shall only have some water, please.”

“Mm-hmm. Same here, then.”

“Please do not hold yourself back; have what you want!”

“It’s fine. There’s something else I want to request of you, so I’ll refrain from food and alcohol tonight.”

“Is that so...?” I wasn’t sure how to react. Why had he abruptly brought up food? Not a moment later, however, a realization dawned on me. He was likely concerned that I was overworking my throat and wanted to give me an opportunity to rest my voice.

The emperor summoned an attendant and asked him to prepare some drinks. Shortly thereafter, a water basin sprinkled with decorative camellia blossoms was delivered. I poured some water into a bowl and took a sip to test for poison before passing it to the emperor. The sweet scent of flowers accented the liquid. Perhaps it had been readied in advance.

“Looks like you were pretty thirsty,” he commented.

“My apologies...”

“You were completely unaware. That’s adorable.” Pleased, he watched me drink, his eyes narrowing marginally before he resumed his questions. “So... How do you activate your power? Were you born with it? Does it awaken at a certain age? Or through practice?”

“It depends on the person, and in my case, mine manifested at the age of seven. The condition for awakening is met when our blood deems one of the daughters in the family the prime successor.”

The emperor’s face lit up. “Oh, really? We’re the same, then. I gained my wings only after I awakened as crown prince.”

“So, you were not born with them?”

“Nope, I wasn’t. It hurt so much when they sprang out...” His smile waned and vanished as he stared at me.

“Your Majesty...?” *Did I do something that upset him?*

The emperor’s eyes remained fixated on me for a while, and then he shook his head, his lips curling into a small smile once again. “It’s nothing.”

Although his expression was mild, I had the feeling that suppressed pain lurked underneath it. Perhaps I was imagining things.

“I hope that one day... I’ll be able to thank you for that time.”

“Thank...me?” I echoed.

“Yep.”

My eyes widened and I leaned forward. “Wait, is that...!” *Did that have something to do with the past I have forgotten?*

With a glance, the emperor gently stopped me in my tracks. “Let’s talk about that another time, okay?”

It probably wasn’t the right time for the topic. “Yes, Your Majesty...”

The emperor gazed at his unfurled wings as he continued, “When the previous emperor lost his divine protection as Amawashi, ruler and god of these lands, the Amawashi slumbering inside me woke. And I became that god. My wings won’t disappear until the day I die.”

His golden eagle wings stretched out across the bed. Large and magnificent, they were also the literal weight of his country and title on his shoulders. He treated them like something he had learned to live with rather than an inborn privilege he could take for granted.

“That sounds daunting...”

“It isn’t all bad. Thanks to these wings, I was able to protect you, Sai. Personally, I think it was worth it.”

He made a good point. If not for those wings, he wouldn’t have been able to fly from the capital of Centoria to my rescue.

“Your Majesty...” I pushed off the bed, kneeled on the carpet, and formally bowed to him as sincerely as I could. “I know that I have expressed my gratitude before, but please allow me to say this again. Thank you very much for saving me. As the Wagtail Priestess, I shall continue to work diligently in Orient so that I can be of aid to you in whatever way possible.”

The emperor looked down at me as he listened to my declaration in silence.

I sucked in a deep breath. “I have revealed the secrets of my lineage as part of that resolution. I wish to dedicate my everything to you, Your Majesty. If there is ever anything I can help with, please do not hesitate to ask it of me.”

After a short pause, he said, “You’re willing to dedicate your everything... Are you sure you don’t want to take back those words?”

With my head lowered, I replied, “Sai Cutrettola died that day. The life that I have right now, right here, belongs solely to you, Your Majesty.”

There was no response.

I pressed on. “I lost the land I inherited from my ancestors and the little wealth I had, as well as all of my living relatives, a long time ago. In a twist of fate, Your Majesty—the descendant of Amawashi—rescued me. It is nothing short of a miracle, and I believe that it is the decree of heaven that the blood of the Wagtail Priestess serve you once again. Please do whatever you wish with me, Your Majesty.”

“...I see.”

For a while, I stayed there on the floor, my face angled down, and quiet reigned.

Eventually the emperor broke the stillness. “Then I’ll give you an order right away, I suppose. Raise your head.”

“...Understood.” Nervously, I lifted my chin.

The emperor offered his hand to me. “Take my hand.”

“Yes.”

“Sit back where you were.”

“...Yes.”

“And could you lie down?”

“Please excuse my intrusion.”

I lay flat on the sheets he’d indicated with a finger. He stared down at me, his eyes wide. He froze for a moment...then, with a creak of the bed, climbed on top of me. His body cast a shadow over me, separating me from everything else. Without a sound, his wings expanded and blocked the ceiling from view. Then—

“Pfft... Heh heh... Ahahahaha... Jeez...” The emperor had thus far maintained a straight face as he loomed over me, and suddenly he began to laugh uncontrollably as if he couldn’t bear it anymore.

“Y-Your Majesty...?”

He sat up. “Are you doing that on purpose? You’re way too trusting!”

I tilted my head in question, confused. I had merely solemnly followed his

instructions, yet something about my obedience seemed to have amused him.

Still chuckling, he said, “Okay, get up.”

Though utterly bewildered, I complied with a “Yes.”

“Oh, Sai.” He sighed. “Didn’t I tell you that you don’t have to mind so much? How were you going to get out of this if I were a big-bad-wolf emperor?”

I shook my head. “There is no way that you could ever be a bad person...”

“Okay, sorry for teasing you. Haha, I really like this aspect of you.”

He was laughing so hard that he was tearing up, and he merrily wiped the corners of his eyes as he steadied his breathing. *I don’t really get what happened, but, well, whatever makes him happy, I guess?*

After he calmed down, he said, “Hey, Sai.”

“Yes?”

“If you wish to lend me your power or work for me—both on the condition that you’re not forcing yourself—I would, of course, be very thankful. But honestly? I don’t want anything more than that.”

I didn’t understand. I had always put all my effort into leading a useful existence, whether for my fiancé, his family, or the Order. I had planned to do the same for the emperor who’d saved me. I wanted to give him everything I had—what little of meager value I owned, such as my magic or other powers.

Yet he was smilingly telling me that he didn’t want to inconvenience me. It was the first time I had ever gotten such a response, and I didn’t know how to react or how to interpret it.

“But...I am the only one benefiting unfairly in that scenario. I would feel a little guilty.”

“Well, why can’t stories that are too good to be true happen in real life sometimes?” His gray-blue eyes tightened, and he gave me a meaningful, sidelong glance. “Or...do you want me to abuse your power for my own gain, hm?”

But I was determined. “As long as you manipulate me well and convince me

that it is for good, you may use me in any way you want.”

“Wow. Okay, now you’re making me worry about you.” Slightly exasperated, the emperor shrugged. “I’ve told you many times, but to return the Wagtail Priestess to Orient is a feat in itself, and my people celebrate me for it. It’s already pretty amazing, you know?”

“I...am not worth that mu—”

He cut off my self-deprecation and stressed each syllable that came out of his mouth. “You. *Are.*”

I swallowed. “Th-Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Yep. And well, with that in mind, if I ever were to order you to do something...”

“Yes?”

“I’d probably command you to live healthily and happily. That’s about it.”

“Healthily and...happily?”

“Is that a tall order?”

That actually sounded more difficult than everything else. I didn’t really know what living healthily and happily entailed. I couldn’t help but question the idea. “I... For the longest time, I thought that living for the sake of others is the duty of the Wagtail Priestess, so...”

“Well, you can figure it out gradually.”

“My deepest apologies...”

“At any rate, you’re already being useful as the Wagtail Priestess. That’s why I want *you* to be happy next, Sai.”

I hesitated. “Yes, Your Majesty. However, if you ever need me in any way, please make use of me without reservation. My life is yours.”

His eyes hardened, glinting menacingly. Usually, he wore a benevolent expression, but at times his face gained the edge of an airborne predator. “Haha. Well, since you want me to use you that much, I suppose there *is* something I would like you to do... It’s the reason why I called you to my

bedroom tonight, actually.”

“Not just to keep you company?”

“Sai. Talking isn’t the only way you can keep someone company in bed, you know?”

“...Huh?”

Almost like a veil of night, his wings overshadowed me once more. He closed in, leaning his head forward as if to study my face. I moved slightly, and the bed let out a small groan. In a repeat of what had happened earlier, he was above me, and so close that our breaths mingled like milk in tea.

“Hey, Sai.” He whispered my name as though begging for my attention. He hooked his fingers on the collar of his nightwear. With a gentle flutter of cloth, the garments slid down his shoulders, and...he turned his back to me.

His voice faltered a little as he said, “Can I ask you to help with my back...? My wings are so heavy.”

As if presenting themselves to me, they extended, filling my vision.

Just in case, I asked him for confirmation. “You want me to give you magical massage therapy...?”

Chapter Twenty-Six: His Nightly Companion—I Shall Demonstrate the Master Hand of the Wagtail Priestess

THE emperor brushed aside the locks of hair tumbling down his back. Under the diffuse lighting, his skin almost glowed. The definition of his bones and muscles formed artistic arcs on his back, looking smooth to the touch.

“You gave me mana a while ago, remember? That was, well, really good, so...” he muttered. He seemed slightly shy.

I nodded. I unwound the decorative cord from my belt and used it to tie up my sleeves in the style of a *tasuki* sash. “Right away, Your Majesty, if that is what you request of me.” I moved forward, the bed creaking a little as I sat in

front of his back.

Lean muscles stretched along his spine, taut and optimal in proportion. They were of the kind of composition that reminded me of athletes who refined their bodies in pursuit of an aesthetic sport.

Because I had been an unofficial employee of the Order, I was used to the sight of men with well-toned bodies. Their muscles were clearly built for fighting and pure power, but the emperor was different. His frame was characterized by slenderness and lean, efficient musculature, and his back was a work of art that befitted the graceful beauty with which he carried himself.

He often seems like an ethereal angel, but when I look at him like this...I'm reminded of the fact that he's a human man with a commanding strength.

His features were androgynous, perhaps even feminine, and coupled with his kindly demeanor, they made it easy to forget that he was taller than me. In fact, his back was so large that I had to crane my head somewhat. When he'd saved me and gathered me into his arms, they had been surprisingly sturdy and firm. He probably needed such physical strength to support his wings, which protruded from his shoulder blades in a symmetrical pair almost like a fluffy second pair of arms.

"Please excuse me." My fingertips found the base of his wings.

The emperor held his breath before releasing a small "Mn."

I frowned. "Your Majesty, I had a similar thought when I touched you a while ago, but..."

"What is it...?"

"That day's strain was not the only source of your exhaustion, was it? It stems from a long time ago... You have chronic fatigue in your mana circuits."

I may have been the Wagtail Priestess, yet I had never given therapy to a person with wings. With my fingertips, I traced every inch of his wings and back, mapping the landscape of his bones and muscles. If I pressed more firmly with my hands, I would be distracted by the feel of his skin. To sense magic, it was vital to only make the barest contact as if stroking the patient with a feather duster.

“The issue is not just your wings,” I explained. “Your shoulder blades, your lower back, which supports the weight of your upper body... We would be here all day if I listed them one by one.”

His breath hitched.

I continued to scan his body. “I am actually impressed that you are able to handle such big wings despite having a human body.”

Slowly, he muttered, “Well... I think...so too...”

The price that humans paid for bipedalism was a body structure that intensely burdened the backbone and pelvis. The average human might experience pain in their lower back and spine just from supporting their own weight, and the emperor was tall and additionally had wings of a length that rivaled his height. I couldn’t imagine how hard his muscles had to work against the pull of gravity just to keep him upright when walking, for example.

“I believe that your abundant mana is essential to constantly provide the enhancement your winged body needs and that this is its primary purpose. Just living would put a heavy strain on your mana circuits due to your constitution, but then there are your responsibilities as emperor... That would make it even easier for you to overwork your body.”

I heard a weak whisper of a laugh, as if he was ticklish.

“May I continue?” I asked.

“Mmh... Go ahead.”

I recalled the various occasions when the emperor had used magic on our journey to Orient. The misogiharae that had involved a complicated and extensive ritual in poetry. The lightning he had summoned as a demonstration to his people, announcing his return. The lamps that illuminated the imperial grounds... All likely necessary strains he had to shoulder as the emperor to maintain his authority.

“This is just a question, but...” As my fingers roved his skin and muscles, I searched for tension in his mana meridians, thinking. “Would it be possible to completely put away your wings on a daily basis?”

“Mn... Their natural state is out, so putting them away would...require me to purposely spend mana. If I’m constantly erasing them, that’s going to...eat up a lot of my magical energy.”

Which means that he should only remove them when absolutely necessary, huh...?

“If possible, the best solution for your body would be to manifest them only when you need them, but if that is going to drain your mana, it defeats the purpose. After all, just look at the state of your mana circuits.”

A mere stroke across his neck with my fingertips made his whole body convulse, and he let out a hoarse gasp. His reaction was a little like how patients responded to electric shocks from a defibrillator in my previous life.

His breathing quickened as he moaned, “Wha— What...are you...?!”

“If your circuits were in a normal state, this would only feel ticklish. However, you are oversensitive to stimuli, are you not?”

Pretending to fiddle with the lines of mana deep inside his body, I pressed my finger into his skin and rubbed little circles.

He inhaled harshly. “Ah...?!”

“There was no strength behind that probe. All I did was trickle in a bit of mana.”

“T-Tell me...you’re jok...ing...”

“I am not... The problem is how sensitive you are.”

With a small whine, he let out several incoherent groans.

I frowned. “And as for your arm... See? The conditions here are not ideal either, which is why your neck is so stiff.”

He loosed an inaudible scream as he sucked in another sharp breath.

Visually, it appeared as if I were simply massaging him with my index and middle finger, but I was actually manipulating his mana circuits through his skin. In the same way the circulatory system distributed blood, special channels within mages conducted mana. And the emperor’s were over taut. The lightest

caress was enough to make his voice tremble.

“Ahn... Too...much...”

“When you cast magic, do you often use the middle and ring fingers on your right hand?”

“N-Now that...you mention...”

“The circuits from your fingers to your shoulders, neck, and wings... If they were muscles, they would be stiff and sore right now. That is the state they are in.”

It was easier for me to sense his mana meridians in places with thinner skin. My finger slid from his fingertips to his palms, then further up his arms. I was tracking the flow of his mana with the utmost concentration, almost as though investigating an underground stream of water. A magical massage wasn't too different from a physical one in principle. I had to understand the condition of his mana circuits and apply mana to them accordingly.

The emperor's breath hitched as he tried to suppress another groan. His wings, as if attempting to endure the onslaught of sensation, shivered.

Once I finished my examination, I leaned forward and whispered into the emperor's ear. “I shall begin. Please forgive my transgression and allow me to speak your name...” I inhaled. *“Emperor Haruka. Feel my touch from your fingertips to your wrist...”*

The moment words of power left my lips, his whole body tensed and spasmed as though pierced by a particularly powerful electric current.

But he did not scream, although muffled noises issued from his mouth as he desperately clenched his teeth. I was honestly quite amazed at his self-restraint considering the overload of his senses.

“Slowly, a pleasant tingle spreads, then warmth. A torrent of heat rushes through your body, crawling up from your fingers. It follows your collarbones and races to your shoulder blades... Please feel my mana flooding underneath your skin.”

I concentrated on my abdomen, panting short breaths as I poured in as much

mana as I could supply. At first I loosened the faucet bit by bit, then gradually turned it to full capacity. A fire burned strong in my stomach. My whole body shook as if I were riding a particularly riotous horse. Even so, I didn't feel as though all my mana was being sucked away. *My mana has increased by an incredible amount compared to back in that cave.*

I exhaled, emptying my lungs. "I shall stop there for now. Thank you for your cooperation." Gently, I removed my fingers from the emperor. I closed my eyes and took deep, quiet breaths, slowly tightening the faucet of my mana to a stop.

When I next opened my eyes, I saw the emperor lying facedown on the bed, completely drained.

I hesitated. "Your Majesty, are you all right?"

"I feel as if someone assaulted me."

"Wait, it was that painful?!"

"Ah, well, it...didn't hurt. Thanks... Yeah..."

"But you said that it felt like an assault..."

"Uh... Not the type you're thinking about... Mm-hmm..." The emperor declined to lift his head from the sheets, nor did he move to reclothe himself. He was behaving as if the very act of talking was too tiresome. I wiped his sweaty back with a towel, and his wings fluttered sluggishly.

"Your Majesty, for a while, I would strongly advise that you channel your magic with your left hand, unless it is an extensive ritual like the misogiharae. Your feet or even your tongue would also work, as long as you do not use the right side of your body. Just allowing your right side to rest for a while will hasten your back's recovery."

He pouted. "I don't really like using my left..."

"I am afraid that such complaints are invalid given the state you are in. Look, if I..."

He gasped.

"See? A small amount of mana is enough to cause such an exaggerated

reaction. Please use your left side until your oversensitivity is healed.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

“In your case, you need to balance your usage of your left and right mana circuits. You need both sides to support your wings, and at the moment, you are putting too much strain on your right side. It is no different from constantly sprinting at full speed with only your right leg.”

“Mhn! Ah... I...see...”

Noticing that his erratic breathing had steadied, I pressed my fingers softly against his wings.

He emitted a tiny squeal. “Th-Those are my wings, you know?”

“May I suffuse your wings with mana as well?”

“Wha—” He let out a distorted croak like a strangled frog. His beautiful eyes opened wide.

“Thanks to the wonderful meals and hot spring you provided, I am the picture of health right now, so I can treat you with my full strength. If you wish me to stop here, however, I shall.”

“W-Wait... You weren’t at...full power last time?”

For some reason, the color seemed to be draining from his face. *Hmm. Are my eyes playing tricks on me?*

“I was around half of my normal effectiveness,” I admitted.

“Ha...lf.”

“During the long period of my detention, I was not treated well, and...I was forced to wear a collar to bind my mana the whole time, so I was far from my prime.”

He buried his face in his hands. “Yeah... No wonder the Order...put that mechanism on you...”

Did he dislike the treatment? Trying to gauge his reaction, I asked, “If you truly are averse to it, I shall stop.”

After a moment of silence, he shook his head. “No. Please do it. I can tell that

you're worried about me, Sai."

I felt a little bud of happiness bloom in my heart at his trust in me. I lightly tapped my cheeks to psyche myself up. "Understood. In that case, unless you express a desire for me to stop, I shall deem it as silent permission and continue to treat you without reservation."

"Do that. I'm the one who made this request, so don't...go easy on me..." As he spoke, his voice grew progressively faint.

Can I really go ahead? But at the same time, I can't leave him hanging halfway like this.

"All right. In the unlikely scenario that I cause you discomfort, I shall commit suicide by disembowelment! And...here I go!"

The emperor's indescribable scream echoed through the room, the curtains fluttering.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: His Nightly Companion—That Is Why My Mana Increased

"...I'M...at my limit..." The emperor's shoulders heaved up and down with labored breaths as he ground his torso into the bed.

I mopped away my sweat, then bowed to him. "I hope you enjoyed the experience."

"Th...anks... Yeah... That felt...amazing..." His voice was still a little high-pitched and strained.

His hair was sticky with perspiration, so I wiped him as clean as I could. His body tensed as if startled. "Mn... I-It's fine. I'll do it myself." I handed over the towel, and he blinked. "Huh? Was there something like this around? Did you bring this here?"

"I made it with magic just now."

"...What?" The emperor's expression, previously dazed and content, changed

to one of perplexity. “What in the world did you use as a medium to make this...?”

“This is what I used.” I pinched one of the threads I had stuffed into my pocket and offered it to him.

His eyes widened. He accepted the thread, looking back and forth between it and the towel. “After pouring all that mana into me, you were still able to make such a big and soft towel...just from threads?”

“To tell you the truth, the Wagtail Priestess has one more secret...” Seeing his eyes on me, I started to explain. “Until now, I had no means to confirm it, so I used to think that it was only an oral legend we passed down, but...I am sure of it now that I have had the honor of touching you twice, so please allow me to tell you.”

After a pause, he nodded. “Okay. What is it?”

“The original duty of the Wagtail Priestess was to teach Amawashi, the emperor of Orient, about human activities.”

“Uh-huh.”

“When I touch your skin, my mana pool increases in proportion to how long I touch you. So that as the priestess, I can be useful to the sacred Amawashi.”

He appeared stunned, and his eyebrows shot up. He did not offer a reply.

“This increase is especially remarkable when you feel pleasure, Your Majesty.”

“Oh... Oh r-really...? I-I see...”

Though he still resembled a deer caught in headlights, the tips of his wings were fidgeting restlessly, making small rustling noises. Due to their size, the movement sent a breeze swirling through the room like a diminutive whirlwind. Upon noticing that his wings had gone rogue, the emperor grabbed a quilt and covered them, forcing them down with a muffled sound.

After a lengthy period of silence, the emperor finally managed to form a sentence. “Yeah, you’re right.” He exhaled. “Yeah, the mana circuit *therapy* felt very good,” he said, placing notable emphasis on the word “therapy.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

There was a lull in the conversation as he looked away, the tips of his ears dusted with the red of roses.

“Um, Your Majesty...”

“Hm?”

“If it is all right with you...” I braced myself before making my proposal. “From now on, if you are fine with it, I wish to heal you with the power of the Wagtail Priestess. The more I touch you, the stronger I get. And then I would be able to treat your body much more thoroughly.”

“...The more you touch me, huh...?”

His ash-blue eyes met mine. The corners of his eyes were a little red.

“I am aware that touching you is sacrilege on my part, but...”

“I...don’t exactly, well, dislike being...touched.”

“Really?” I asked, doubtful.

“Kind of, yeah...”

I could breathe a sigh of relief at that. “Your Majesty, if we leave your fatigued mana circuits as they are, it may affect your lifespan negatively. So if mana usage is an absolute must for the sake of your wings and your duties, please grant me the permission to treat them.”

After a long pause, the emperor cast a glance at his wings. “Yeah... You’re right.” His wings extended beyond his arms when fully unfolded and, in the wake of therapy, seemed to shine with a glamorous luster under the light. “To be honest, I resigned myself to a short life the moment I gained these wings. When I became the divine emperor, my mana pool increased like there was no tomorrow, yet at the same time, I could tell that just by living on, that same mana would eat away at my lifespan.”

“Your Majesty...”

“My father wasn’t an exception—he didn’t survive for long after handing over the throne to me either... Such is the fate of the god of this country.” He gazed at his wings, his lips pulling into a taut curve with a hint of self-deprecation. Then he looked directly into my eyes. “That doesn’t mean I want to die early.

Never. If you are willing to do this for me, Sai, I will happily make the request.” His smile became a little more genuine, almost as if a flower were blooming right in front of me.

Seeing it, I couldn’t help but feel happy as well. “Thank you very much...!” That I had found a purpose, even just one, delighted me. “In the near future, you will likely obtain an empress who will stay by your side. It is out of the question for me to barge into your bedchambers at that point, so I shall do everything I can to vastly improve your mana circuits until then!”

“...An empress, huh?” he muttered in a low voice seemingly to no one. He sighed. “A little too late for that. I feel as if a certain someone has debauched me, so I can no longer marry anyone else.”

Wholly confused, I tilted my head in question.

“Nothing.” He shook his head, then hesitated. “Hey, Sai...” Trailing off, he turned to face me once again. With a whisper of cloth, he closed in on me until we were sitting right next to each other. When so near, his presence overwhelmed me for some mysterious reason.

His wings unfurled slightly as if to envelop me.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Do you remember the wagtail’s role in the myths?”

“I do.” I nodded. “In the Myth of Beginning, Amawashi knew nothing about human behavior. So the priestess, a human herself, taught him, or so the myths say.”

After a beat, he mumbled, “Yeah. The myth in Orient is the same as the myth in Centoria, that should be right...”

In my previous life, the wagtail had featured in myths all over the world as a bird that symbolized love and matrimonial peace. My memories were vague, but I was pretty sure that I had heard about shrines and parks named for the wagtail in a desire to promote harmony in marriage and family life. Wagtail stands had even been used to ornament Japanese weddings, since in the myths, wagtails had taught the deities Izanami and Izanagi how to procreate. Similar legends probably existed in the world of the game.

While my mind wandered off to such topics, the emperor approached me, his sweet scent engulfing me in the ghost of an embrace. His ash-blue eyes bored into mine. *Does he want to say something?*

“Your Majesty?”

With his large wings draping over me like a curtain, I rather felt as if all paths of escape had been cut off. I knew that he was a kind and gentle soul, yet with his golden eagle wings, he almost looked like a lethal bird of prey.

“Sai... Do you have no desire to become...” He paused. “...my *empress*?”

The stare of such a beautiful man was too much for me, and I lowered my head. His eyes had been earnest, and apologetically I began, “Your Majesty.”

“Yeah?”

“I am a lowly woman who was nearly executed by my fiancé. And as you can see, my appearance has not even a hint of charm, either.”

“I...I don’t think that at all though...”

“I am very honored to hear such words. I know my standing very well, however. I...never even held hands with my former fiancé, and... In truth, he often berated me...about how I was inadequate in my lack of appeal as a woman.”

“...Oh.” For an instant, I saw a dark gleam in his eyes.

I continued to make my case. “Thus, I... I would be unable to help you in the way of the Wagtail Priestess in the legends... I cannot help you in the matters of marriage nor with the relationship between you and your future empress consort...” My hands were fisted on my knees, and my fingernails dug into my palms as I squeezed even tighter.

“However!” I lifted my head and looked at the emperor, who was so close that I could feel his breaths. “In exchange, I shall do whatever I can for you. I shall make you drunk with pleasure, and as my mana pool increases, I shall make you melt even more in my hands, Your Majesty!”

“Hey, can’t you say it another way?” He let out a prolonged sigh, then the corners of his eyes softened as he grinned. “Thanks. I can tell how much you

care about me, Sai.” His wings nimbly stretched, accompanied by a wind that fluttered the curtains, and the sight was almost like a scene out of a fairy tale. “Then, please continue to take care of me. Yeah... I think this could be a pretty good relationship for both of us.”

“If being alone with me will cause you trouble, you could always arrange for someone to oversee us.”

“Never *ever*.”

And with that, it was settled: I would visit the emperor’s bedchambers at regular intervals to give him magical massage therapy for his mana circuits. Since I was the Wagtail Priestess, even if I called on him thus from time to time, people probably wouldn’t mistake me for his future empress consort.

He chuckled. “Okay, in that case... I’ll summon you here again and again to attend me in bed as my nightly companion, okay?”

“Your Majesty, describing it as such might be problematic.”

“Why?”

“Well... The beloved mistresses doted on by noble men are sometimes called nightly companions. If you summon me every night before you have a consort and refer to me in such a way, some might assume incorrectly.”

For some reason, the emperor appeared dumbfounded. Or perhaps exasperated. He exhaled long and hard, dragging out his sigh.

I blinked. “Your Majesty...?”

“Okay... Please let me ask you this, then. Sai, are you repulsed by the thought of being assumed to be my beloved consort?”

“Um, uh, well...” I was thrown off by the query. How I viewed it didn’t matter, after all. *Is he asking about the misunderstanding itself?* “I understand that I am only here to attend you and give you treatment...”

“Then you don’t have to care, right?”

“Huh? Um—”

“It’s a deal, then!”

And he ended the conversation with that. Disallowing any complaints, the emperor had decided to dub me his nightly companion.

It was the first duty I would take on in Orient, and it would be my primary job. I balled my hands into fists and hardened my resolve, silently vowing that I would definitely melt the emperor into a puddle of pleasure and heal him successfully.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Inauguration of Sekirei Palace and a Name to Worship a God

THE stigmatized property, formerly known as the Inner Palace, officially had a new name: Sekirei Palace. A week had passed since my advent in Orient, and a formal welcoming ceremony was conducted to receive me.

Bureaucrats of the imperial court lined up in neat rows. Although I was a little nervous about appearing in front of them, I fully trusted the maids who had followed me from Centoria, and Lord Yukinari had made many arrangements to aid me, so my anxiety eased. Thanks to them, I was able to go through the entire ceremony without slipping up.

The emperor presided over the rituals in his godly form, sitting on the distant throne with a circlet on his head like an angel's halo. His large golden eagle wings expanded across the back of his seat. They created a magnificent contrast to his pristine, silk clothes of pure white.

“Wagtail Priestess Sai.”

When he called my name, his address was completely different from how he spoke to me at night. *That's how it's supposed to be. This sacred man is not somebody I could ever talk to under normal circumstances. I need to remember my place,* I reminded myself. I straightened my back.

He continued, “We shall bestow a new name upon you. In Orient, you shall be Sai Sekireimiya.”

I had retained my given name, Sai, while Cutrettola had been translated into

the Oriental language or what would have been Japanese in my previous life. The Japanese character assigned to “Sai” had apparently been decided by the emperor himself. It had a few meanings—the first was religious purification, and the second was worshipping, amusing, or consoling a god. *Did he do that on purpose, or did he just pick a random character that had the right pronunciation?* I didn’t know the answer.

“You have my most sincere gratitude,” I replied. “I have only recently arrived in the lands of the Orient and am aware that I may be lacking in many ways. I promise, however, that I shall perform the duties of the Wagtail Priestess with all of my heart, so that I may satisfy the expectations of Your Majesty and your honorable empire.”

I saw the ghost of a smile behind his veil.

“Sai. We are looking forward to how you shall *satisfy* Us.”



SEKIREI Palace would serve Orient as an establishment of magic and fall under the direct supervision of the emperor. I, the Wagtail Priestess, would be the mistress of its affairs, and all its assigned personnel, eventually, would be women.

That wasn’t currently possible, however, so clergy from the Department of Divinities—who had jurisdiction over the emperor’s sacred duties such as the misogiharae—would handle management and administration for the time being.

Almost as if the building had suddenly come to life, desks and bookshelves along with other furniture were carried into the spacious palace one by one. All the activity made me feel as if things were kicking off.

Lively conversations chattered in the background. For example...

“Hey, Li’l Suzuiro, we’re bringing in a set of cabinets next, so lead the way!”

“Yes sir! Over here, please!”

The man grinned. “Hey, don’t leave us behind! There’s no need to run, haha.”

The officials were already familiar enough with Suzuiro to give her a

nickname. Suzuiro, meanwhile, busied herself with her job as a trainee attendant. Her energetic voice and honest nature had immediately earned her the friendship of the officials even though they were unused to the presence of young girls. They seemed to dote on her like a cute little sister.

When I asked Suzuiro whether any other ladies-in-waiting were expected, she replied, as lively as ever, “My lady! I have heard that I am the only one for now!”

I breathed a sigh of relief at that. In terms of both labor costs and management, a reduced staff was a weight off my shoulders. I was the only one living in the palace, so I preferred fewer workers if possible.

“That said...I need to find at least a *few* new court ladies, and fast...”



IT was yet another busy day of preparations and official proceedings at Sekirei Palace. Time flew by, and before I knew it, noon had already arrived. My stomach was pleading for a break.

I glanced at the kitchen from the courtyard. The maids looked extremely occupied. “Until a year ago, I also worked as a maid, so I feel a little restless...” I muttered to myself.

The urge to join them was strong, but I stopped myself from standing up. I had my own job to do. I lightly slapped my cheeks to motivate myself and returned my attention to the documents I needed to go through. *I’m so glad that my parents hammered the art of reading and writing into me as the Wagtail Priestess. Education begets success, as they say.*

The women serving Sekirei Palace were solely employees and not candidates for the empress. Of course, since the harem had been abolished, they weren’t concubines either, or so I had heard. The change in designation was logical considering the controversy caused by the practice during the previous emperor’s reign. The new arrangement was akin to the system of court ladies in Japan’s imperial court and was another instance of the Japanese influence on the game’s setting.

Half of the roster were married women, and the other half were presently

single. A surprisingly high percentage of people remained single in Orient. In the aristocracy, a woman's duty was marriage and the production of heirs to continue her family's line. But among commoners, an oddly large portion of the population, both women and men, dedicated their entire lives to their family's trade instead of marrying.

Multiple reasons likely contributed to the trend. As a country that prided itself on its medicinal industry, Orient had low infant mortality. As a result, a lot of men were second sons who wouldn't inherit and therefore opted to become traveling merchants, never settling down to have a family. Additionally, many mothers raised children out of wedlock. Some villages comprised a single family, so marriage granted little advantage unless it was that of a legitimate heir. There was also a significant quota of women employed in the textile and medical industries.

At the end of the day though, I had been born and raised in Centoria. Even if I utilized my memories of my past life, that was about all I could deduce.

That aside, as the mistress of Sekirei Palace, I was very thankful for people who could stay on long-term. It was especially helpful that there were women around who remembered the period when the harem was still extant—their advice could help me prevent history from repeating itself. The attendants came from a variety of backgrounds: some of them were (distantly) related to bureaucrats, while others hailed from merchant families.

In the future, more young women would come to the palace for work as court ladies, so I needed to make sure the foundation of the position was sturdy and the place ready for their arrival.

"Lady Sai, lunchtime is soon," a maid called out to me. She had good timing, for I was a little peckish.

"Thank you. I shall head over, then."

I stopped writing and promptly walked across the corridor, heading toward the dining room. Sekirei Palace's dining room was newly renovated, and it was a sight to behold, especially with the flowers that the maids arranged every day. The bouquets didn't cost us anything because they merely selected a few wildflowers blooming in the atrium, and such a small detail was enough to liven

up the entire room. That day, bright yellow rapeseed flowers glowed under the light.

In conjunction with the noon bell, the maids carried over our meals.

The one serving me introduced the food. “Lady Sai, the menu for today’s lunch is rice cooked with seasonal ingredients with a side of stir-fried rapeseed flowers. The soup is an egg soup.”

“Thank you. I could smell a delectable aroma from outside, so I was looking forward to this.”

It had become a habit of mine to eat lunch with Suzuiro each day, and that day was no exception as she joined me.

Before we dug in, I offered my prayers to the heavens. “O heavens above, thank you for permitting me to live yet another day under your blessing...”

Once I finished the litany, I lifted my chopsticks. As I brought the food to my mouth, the mild aroma of spring ingredients wafted past my nose. It was irresistible.

Suzuiro sighed in contentment. “Your Suzuiro *loooves* sweet egg soup!” She looked like an adorable hamster, eating happily with a big grin on her face, and I felt all of my fatigue leave my body watching her. She didn’t have a uniform yet, so she wore the ruqun from her girls’ school when she worked.

Observing her puffed cheeks, I asked, “Is sugar often used in day-to-day cooking in Orient?”

Thinking about it, I realized the empire boasted an extensive range of sweet foods. In Centoria, sugar was a luxury. It wasn’t as though we never had the chance to eat it, but commoners, at least, couldn’t afford it. And although I’d had the opportunity to enjoy sugar once in a blue moon, daily use had been out of the question. Sometimes sugar-rich desserts figured in the social conventions of upper-class nobles as presents to the king or confectionery on special occasions. But most of the time, sweets were made with substitutes like honey.

Suzuiro blew on her hot soup, answering, “I don’t think sugar is all that rare. Um... The Orient Empire imports the raw ingredients for our medicine from another continent across the sea, after all.” Her point of view very much

befitted a daughter of a family that managed an apothecary business.

“Another continent...” I mulled. “So it is not Meridiona in the south or even Occidenia in the west?”

“It isn’t! It’s... Uh, sorry, I forget where it is, but! The empire imports goods from there via Meridionan merchant ships. That’s why loads of sugar comes into the country, since it’s everywhere in Meridiona! That’s what my father told me!”

Diplomatic relations between Centoria and Meridiona were practically nonexistent. It made sense that Centoria hardly had any sugar.

“The sugar industry in Meridiona is amazing! Apparently, they have mines where they can find all the sugar they want.”

“A...mine of sugar?” I repeated in surprise.

In my previous life, sugar wasn’t found in mines. I looked down at the sweet, fluffy egg I was eating. *Could this sugar be from a mine too?*

“Supposedly, Meridiona also actively cultivates crops they can process into sugar. Those’re super pricey from what I hear, so I rarely see that stuff at home.”

“Wow. If it doesn’t show up much in your household, it must cost an arm and a leg...”

“But Orient imports heaps of sugar from the mines! I don’t know about other cities, but in the capital, we have a lot of sweets made with sugar!” Her eyes lit up. “At festivals, there are rows upon rows of candy vendors, and sugary foods always show up in tea parties and important ceremonial occasions! The four major ones are coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and when we perform rites for our ancestors!”

“I see. I should remember that difference in culture, huh?”

Orient and Centoria were on the same continent, and their languages had many similarities. Yet there was a stark contrast in their cultural practices. Though I had known about that disparity in theory and from literature, life in Orient had taught me that the differences were greater than I’d assumed. I had

to be more careful about using my magic in Orient, for example, whereas in Centoria the skill was pretty much ubiquitous.

“When merchant ships dock in Kitoko, in the big northern harbor, it’s pretty much like a festival! Our company gets buried with work too!” Suzuiro let out a sigh of admiration. “I really want to see those big ships, so I hope to go to Kitoko one day. But Father shot that down, saying, ‘You’re tiny, and you might get lost!’ He wouldn’t...bring me along...” Almost like ice cream melting under the sun, Suzuiro visibly deflated.

“It’s all right, I am sure he will take you there one day.”

Her father made a good point. At her height, she would get lost in a crowd immediately, and there was the risk of her curiosity getting the better of her, causing her to run off somewhere.

She leaned toward me and began to speak in a hushed voice, a first for her. “Ah, that aside, Lady Sai...”

“Hm? What is it?” Sipping my soup, I also leaned in slightly.

“Lady Sai, you have the...*favor*...of the emperor, right?”

I nearly choked.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: No Longer Alone

I nearly choked, and somehow, I managed to prevent myself from coughing. “Th-That is not the case at all.”

“Huh? Wait, really?” Her large, doe-like eyes widened in surprise. “Um, Lady Sai, my family runs an apothecary business.”

“Yes, I am aware.”

“Because of that, I’d hear things from the medicine vendors, and, well... In Centoria, short hair is a sign that a woman is romantically interested in someone, right?”

“...You are very knowledgeable.”

I felt as if someone had dumped a bucket of ice water on me, though not entirely due to Suzuiro’s words. In Centoria, we never encountered information about Orient. There was the geographical reason in that a mountain range and impassable snow separated the two nations from each other, as well as the diplomatic one in that both had been reserved about building a diplomatic relationship until recently. That wasn’t all, however—frankly, Centoria paid little attention to Orient.

The royalty and nobility of Centoria cared exclusively about their territory and the new uprising faction in Meridiona. Meanwhile, they turned their backs on snowy Orient, which they considered impoverished in both resources and wealth. In contrast, in Orient, though she was additionally the daughter of an affluent merchant family, a *normal girl* knew about Centorian culture. *That’s... The implications are terrifying.*

She puffed her chest with pride. “Obtaining information on our clients is more important than anything else in the trade of medicine!”

Let’s put that aside for now and just dote on her. She’s so cute. “Miss Suzuiro, please be careful to maintain the security of your client information.”

“Of course! Ah, so, back to the topic!” Suzuiro leaned forward enthusiastically. “Your beautiful hair is really short, Lady Sai, so I deduced that

you might have cut it recently! Hee-hee-hee...”

I hesitated. “Well, I *do* trim it routinely...” I pinched a lock of my black hair. During my detention in Centoria I was forced to let it grow out, and right before my scheduled execution, I had done what little grooming I could by hacking it short. Naturally, I had been rather sloppy about it, and after I arrived in Orient, a maid helped me even the length. Thus, my hair was even shorter than before, in a bob that reached just below my ears.

Oriental citizens were in the habit of growing their hair long enough to be tied back, so mine must have seemed significantly short to them. Suzuiro, for example, wore her silvery hair in a ponytail. Lustrous like strands of metal under light, it hung all the way to her knees, gleaming like a gorgeous cutlassfish.

“From the preceding evidence!” Suzuiro raised a finger. “I assumed that His Majesty might have fallen in love with you and that he might be courting you, Lady Sai!”

“I-I see... I can see where you are coming from...”

“If His Majesty truly does harbor special affection for you, Lady Sai, your Suzuiro thinks that it is wonderful! So, am I...right? Surely?”

I smiled wryly. “Well... He does treat me courteously, so much so that I feel I must do something in return, but...”

Her eyes sparkled as she looked at me, and my chest tightened. I had been derided by and driven out of my country, so it made my day to hear that she thought so positively about the possibility that the emperor was fond of me. But I needed to correct her misunderstanding, or else scandal at the expense of the emperor might spread throughout the capital due to a slip of her tongue. *I must nip it in the bud.*

I took a deep breath. “Miss Suzuiro, my deepest apologies, but...”

“Yes, my lady?”

“That is not the case.”

“Huh? R-Really...?”

“Really. I am the Wagtail Priestess, His Majesty’s subject. Nothing more,

nothing less.”

Dejection seemed to be written on her face in bold print.

“Though I have ancient blood running in my veins, someone of my status could never be worthy of the honorable emperor’s affections.”

“Even if you are the Wagtail Priestess?”

“My household is not an established family in this nation, nor do I have any political backing. The title does not really mean anything.”

“Hmm... Is that really the case...?” Suzuiro crossed her arms, contemplating my claim with a frown. She was the daughter of wealthy merchants, so surely she understood the importance of background in a union by marriage.

Yet she didn’t appear very convinced as she muttered, “I mean, you’re the great Wagtail Priestess, so...”

Ah. That’s right. The emperor popularized a rather glorified depiction of the Wagtail Priestess in Orient in advance of my return. I guess I should have seen this coming. It’s not so strange for her to have gotten the wrong impression.

Her eyes lit up again as she began to hound me about the topic once more: “Then, is it another man? Do I know him? Who is he?” While I sat stunned speechless by her hypothesis, she started to count on her fingers as she listed a bunch of names. “Let’s see, a man who’s perfect for the Wagtail Priestess, and single on top of that, would be... Someone from the Shiga clan, or the Haku clan, or Lord Hiaki from the Gou clan, or...or...”

Sorry, but I don’t know any of them...

“Miss Suzuiro, do you possibly like talking about romance...?”

Her reply was immediate. “Of course! I love it!”

“I am a little surprised.”

“I mean, the reason why I first admired you was because of the love story between Amawashi and the Wagtail Priestess, and...”

“Ah, right, you mentioned that.”

For some reason, in the Orient Empire, the Myth of Beginning was an

extremely popular subject for romance novels targeting young women, perhaps because books featuring imperial harems were taboo. I had borrowed one such novel from Suzuiro as a way to learn about Oriental culture, and from its very start, the Wagtail Priestess was given, well, rather exaggerated powers and a convoluted character background. Though she wasn't me, I felt a little awkward continuing, so I hadn't read even half of it.

"Plus, choosing the right man to marry will determine the fate of your family, so we can't slack on that! As the daughter of a merchant family, training myself to pick the good ones is one of my important duties! That's why I am *veeery* curious!"

I see. I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything less, huh? Many trade families conferred to their daughters the authority to find an outstanding man to marry into the concern and adopt their surname, thus protecting their bloodline and business. The head of the family, the father, usually had the final say about the groom, yet the mother and her heiress were probably both expected to have keen observation skills. They had to pick the future big boss that would decide the destiny of their family, after all.

"That's why, well... I wondered about your situation, Lady Sai, and... I couldn't help myself. I'm sorry." Suzuiro seemed to have come to her senses and realized that she may have trespassed too far into private territory. In her embarrassment, her voice slowly grew smaller and smaller. "If you end up returning to Centoria one day to marry the man you have dedicated your hair to, your Suzuiro will miss you a lot... That's why I was hoping that the person you liked was in Orient..."

"Miss Suzuiro, come now, please do not be so disheartened. I'm not offended at all." I picked up a dessert set aside for after the meal and tossed it into her petite mouth. She chewed on it, and although she still resembled a wilting flower, I could see the redness in her cheeks. Her emotions were written on her face.

I watched her for a while, then said, "I will never return to Centoria."

"Weawy?"

"Yes, really. I swear to the heavens that the Wagtail Priestess belongs to His

Majesty. Even if you leave Sekirei Palace one day, even if this palace falls into ruin, I shall stay in Orient somehow and continue to devote my entire life to him.”

I wasn’t exaggerating. Even if Sekirei Palace were abandoned, I had work experience as a maid, so I could probably find some kind of job. The empire would be my final resting place.

There was a still in our conversation, and I held up a lock of my short hair and explained, “You were asking about my hair, right? I have never been formally married to anyone before.”

Suzuiro blinked her large eyes, confused. “Then...”

“I dedicated my hair when I was thirteen. In commemoration of my engagement, I braided my cut hair into a decorative wreath and gave it to my fiancé. He broke off our engagement though, so my hair was gone for nothing.”

Suzuiro froze, motionless as a statue. “Broke off...your engagement...?”

“Well, although I was wrongly accused, I was once imprisoned and nearly executed, you see.”

Silence.

I looked at her worriedly. “Um, Miss Suzuiro?”

Her big eyes started to tear. “I-I only knew that you went through terrible things in Centoria, but... How could such a thing...?”

“Ah... No, it’s—”

“You even sacrificed your hair, one of the most important things for a young maiden, but... Even that was ruined... That’s way too...” Suzuiro buried her face in her hands and began to bawl.

Suddenly I was the one panicking. “U-Um, it’s all right. It’s all in the past.”

The phrase “broken engagement” was certainly shocking in itself. Yet my relationship with my former fiancé had pretty much ended the instant the Saint was summoned. Not to mention that in the first place, ours had been arranged for the convenience of both of our families, rather than pursued out of romantic love.

I couldn't deny the fact that my history in Centoria was painful. But it was already over, and I had no plans of letting it influence me in the present. Miss Suzuiro was a different case, however. Her eyes were puffy from crying, and she covered her face as tears streamed down her cheeks.

I tried to console her through her sobs. "It is all in the past. Please don't cry."

She shook her head fervently. "Even if it's over, that doesn't change the fact that you suffered!"

"Miss Suzuiro..."

"I'm sorry, Lady Sai, I thoughtlessly asked you about something so sensitive... I'm so sorry..."

"It is perfectly fine... I would actually like to thank you for crying on my behalf."

The tears pouring down Suzuiro's face seemed to gently loosen a part of my heart that I had locked away. Certainly, my experiences had been so painful that it wouldn't have been strange for me to cry at any point. But I couldn't. I couldn't shed tears as the Wagtail Priestess; I hadn't had the luxury of wallowing in self-pity. Perhaps there was a kind world out there that allowed for one to stop in their tracks and cry their hearts out in the company of someone who cared, but that had never been my world, nor my life. I had thought that an existence such as mine was what I deserved.

"I never knew how heartwarming it is to have somebody willing to cry for me," I whispered.

"Lady Sai...?"

"I can't remember the last time I felt this." I smiled at her and wiped her tears carefully with a handkerchief. "Miss Suzuiro, while I am happy that you care enough to cry for my sake, you will scare your uncle if he sees your puffy eyes."

"Yes, my lady... I'm so...rry..." She hiccupped and started crying once more.

I gathered her into my arms and softly stroked her hair. My heart was suddenly swelling with an uncontrollable warmth. It was filled not with the knives of sorrow but with tender rays of happiness. Surely, Suzuiro was also

crying on behalf of the Centorian Sai, who had always endured and had restrained her sadness from leaking out in the form of tears.

“Thank you, Miss Suzuiro.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered what I should do with my clothes, soiled as they were with her tears and snot. I let her cry in my embrace until she calmed down.

With a small smile, I said, “As thanks for those tears, I need to make sure I protect Sekirei Palace and let it prosper.”

Once again, I hardened my resolve. Responsibility rested on my shoulders. Precious, beloved responsibility. *So that I never make her cry again, I'll do my best as the mistress of Sekirei Palace!*

Interlude: A Saint Named Lilly

SAINT Lilly strutted through the royal palace with a spring in her step. Maids smiled at her—naturally—and made way for her as she passed, and so did knights and nobles, as if that was the obvious response to her presence. The Saint summoned by the king and queen was a sacred being. The only things that could stop her were the country's royalty or the will of heaven.

She was clad merely in thin silk, revealing her supple flesh. With her every movement, intricate, thin gold ornaments chimed as they slid over her soft skin. Her hair flowed in delicate arcs like clouds dyed the color of peaches, and her long eyelashes framed jewels of a fantastical hue.

The first impression one had of her was that she didn't seem real. She almost looked like a painting come to life.

Lilly walked on but was interrupted when a maid transporting dishes on a cart bumped into her. The maid gasped and tensed before hanging her head and trotting to one side of the corridor with faltering steps so that their eyes didn't meet. The cart rattled in her shaking hands.

Lilly let out a silent laugh. Her grin was akin to that of a child who has just

found her target in a game of hide-and-seek. With noiseless footsteps, Lilly closed in on the woman, her saintly attire fluttering in the air like the wings of a butterfly.

A snow-white finger poked the cart. “Hey.” Lilly leaned forward to study the maid, who gulped. Lilly smiled sweetly.

The maid squeaked out a panicked “Ah!”

“You’re a real cutie. What’s your name?”

“I...I...”

“Tell me your name, will you?”

A name spilled from the maid’s lips in a trembling voice.

“...I see. So, you are Miss Jane, right?” Lilly seized the maid’s chin and forced their eyes to meet.

A few seconds passed, and the maid’s eyes clouded. Almost like a puppet on strings, the woman opened her mouth wide.

Lilly plucked a grape off the bunch on the platter and stuffed it into the woman’s mouth. “Here you go, eat up.”

The woman chewed, then swallowed. As soon as she swallowed, she paled and smacked her hand to her mouth.

Lilly’s voice was like a guillotine. “You’re meant to take those grapes to His Majesty the King, right?”

Soundlessly, the maid collapsed onto the ground.

“Oh dear.” Lilly smirked. “You ate it!”

Then she left. As she turned the corner, she could hear a ruckus where she’d just been.

“Bye-bye,” Lilly whispered.

She had dealt with yet another unnecessary rat that had caught on to her powers.



MANA existed in the world of the Saint, and as the Saint, Lilly had a staggering amount of it. She had enough to rival royalty descended from gods or even a priestess with ancient blood.

But magic wasn't omnipotent. Significant practice was required to bend magic to one's every whim. Knowledge, intellect, and talent, as well as diligence, were all needed in harmonious balance. Otherwise it was no different from casting pearls before swine.

This place is nothing but a dream to me in the end.

Lilly was a Saint who had been ritually summoned. Their world was fleeting in her eyes, so why should she waste her time by working hard? She had the special powers of the Saint and political authority over an entire country completely at her mercy to boot, so she didn't want to lift a finger.

While there were a few other conditions she had to fulfill, Lilly could manipulate the actions of others as long as she looked into their eyes. What she couldn't do was control their emotions—their heart.

But what difference did it make? Actions weaved together a human's identity and emotions in their subconsciousness. If they met Lilly every day, their hearts would race. If they experienced something painful and Lilly was present to console them, they would fall into the snare of love.

It was easy. Engineering people's emotions by controlling their actions was a piece of cake for her.

Take Alexei, for example, who had fallen in love with Lilly at first sight. With that fiancée called Sai around, however, he had been resolute about never making a move on another woman.

Which was why Lilly had touched his hand, gazed into his eyes, and lured him into a honeyed union. Then, when he'd buried his face in his hands as he sat on the bed, she'd breathed into his ear, "Hey. Admit it. You wanted to fall in love with me, didn't you?"

That was the moment when the look in his eyes distinctly changed.



LILLY came to an inner courtyard and headed toward the chapel. Leaves of vibrant green blanketed the space with nature, and on the other side, a man in armor dazzling under the sunlight was waving his hand. Alexei rushed over with his large build, almost like a dog, and Lilly waved back, all smiles.

“Lilly!” he exclaimed. “Why are you here without guards?”

“I don’t need any guards. I am only paying a visit to the chapel, after all.”

“But you’re the Saint. Even inside the palace, you’re not completely safe.”

Lilly smiled in a sloppy imitation of a young noblewoman. “My lord, do you truly believe that?” She beamed in blatant happiness at the hand that was stroking her cheek, and Alexei reacted by gaining a dusting of pink just as obvious on his own.

He was a prideful man with both political and physical power. To see him turn into a lapdog was pleasant indeed.

“It’s all right,” Lilly reassured him. “The Evil Priestess isn’t around, and I have you. Here in Centoria I could doze off in the garden without a worry in the world.”

Alexei’s face fell, as unsubtle as always. He caught Lilly’s wrist and tugged her toward the chapel. “I’ll escort you. The country can’t afford anything happening to you.”

And he spoke no more as he cut across the courtyard.

After the *incident*, the man had lost his rank of Holy Knight Commander. The position had been left empty for the time being, and the Pope Advisor was overseeing the Order as a standin, apparently. Lilly didn’t know anything more about the matter of the Order’s personnel. She also didn’t care to learn more.

One fact she knew for certain, however, was that the handsome man in front of her had been battered by adversity after adversity through the whole affair.

“You poor thing. If that Evil Priestess hadn’t been around, neither the country nor you would have to deal with so much trouble.” Lilly halted her steps and looked up at Alexei with as much melancholy as she could muster.

And sure enough, he freezes after seeing me on the verge of tears. He’s sooo

easy to read.

Alexei pulled her into his arms. "Lilly, you don't have to worry about anything. Forget all about it."

Lilly was an astute woman. She knew that actions were what weaved together a human's identity and emotions in their subconsciousness. Sow an action, and you reap a character, and eventually you reap a destiny.

Or at least, that's what some wise guy said. When I make someone act in the way I like, if I whisper a "valid reason" into their ear afterward, even if it's not what they initially thought, people trust me surprisingly easily. Even if I don't use that thing they call "magic."

If I have them smash a vase, I whisper, "You must have been suffering because that person tormented you." Then, voilà! For some reason, they assume "that person" to be the offender and tormentor. If I let a merchant buy jewels in bulk and then smile as I say, "Oh, you can just balance the books somehow by shifting the budget from something else," they make false accounts.

Lilly's powers came with conditions. Magic couldn't do everything, but she didn't care. In her eyes, as long as the day was enjoyable and as long as she could cause chaos, it was more than enough for her.

Everyone would forgive her no matter what she did. *After all, this country's gonna end if I don't work hard!*

...Not that I feel like doing anything for them though.

Fourth Arc: The Wagtail Priestess Dispatches a Living Remnant and Dispels Rumors about Her Golden Eagle Emperor

Chapter Thirty: Morning Routines, Medicinal Herbs, and Makeup

HALF a month had passed since I moved into Sekirei Palace. Slowly, I had developed a set morning routine.

“Mn...”

The shrill, raspy chatter of a magpie outside my window roused me from sleep, and I sat up in a bed far too luxurious for someone of my position. The adorable, white and black bird didn’t stick around to frolic and hastily flew off after I woke.

I shivered from the chill as I rose to wash my face. My mornings began earlier in Orient than in Centoria, and despite the recent start of summer, mornings and evenings were freezing.

I walked around the courtyard after awakening to warm up my body, then changed into my day clothes with the help of the maids. Surprises were frequent during that part of my routine because I often found new garments available for selection—gifts from the emperor.

Sighing, I murmured, “Though I am grateful for His Majesty’s generosity, I feel that he is being too nice to me...”

A maid smiled while tying my sash. “If you had only one good set of attire to wear, our citizens would think His Majesty negligent toward the Wagtail Priestess, my lady. The fabric would not last, either.”

“Is that how it works...?”

The court likely required that I keep up appearances as the Wagtail Priestess, although that was just a guess on my part. Every morning, the clothes I put on felt pleasant against my skin, the sensation reminding me of the heavy expectations on my shoulders as the mistress of Sekirei Palace. All the clothing I wore featured the same palette of inky monotone, just like the wagtail in my title. To my knowledge I was the only one in the imperial court who dressed in such a color.

“White, glossy silk...” I muttered. “White is the emperor’s color, and the clergy who serve him all wear colors similar to white... Does that mean my clothes are white and black to show that I answer directly to him?”

“I am not sure about that... In my opinion, a splash of more vibrant hues would look good on you too. After all, you are a maiden the height of your youth.” The maid stroked her chin. “Well, it’s probably to His Majesty’s liking.”

“I’m not so sure about that...”

“All right, my lady, to compensate, I shall make your makeup as dazzling as a field of flowers!”

“P-Please go ahead...”

Male government officials sported the color that corresponded with their department of employ, and the maids assigned to Sekirei Palace wore the same uniform as the women at the embassy in Centoria: bright tops and skirts of matching shades in the style of ruqun. From a distance, the dark wagtail—me—would probably stand out.

“The maids already have a uniform, so we’ll leave that for now, but... Perhaps I should prepare a uniform for the court ladies that’ll join us in the future,” I mumbled to myself.

While excessive regulation was unnecessary, a uniform would create an atmosphere that was uniquely “Sekirei Palace.” Due to the controversy during the harem period, many people were likely opposed to the idea of women living on the imperial grounds. For sake of appearance, it was important to demonstrate that Sekirei Palace wasn’t a harem but a functioning government division.

Perhaps because of the emperor's backing, or perhaps because of my title, at present, few outwardly loathed the fact that a woman occupied Sekirei Palace. As the number of female attendants increased, however, some select people would likely begin to find fault in our every nook and cranny.

So I wanted a uniform, a dress code according to station like that of the male court officials. I needed to change everyone's impression of career women within the palace, and consequently, presentation was a must.

Okay, so we have ladies-in-waiting who'll work in the imperial complex... Hmm, the court system in Japan's probably a better reference than the one in China, but... I groaned. *The problem is that I can't wholly remember every single detail from my previous life...*

After I finished changing and readying myself, the maids led me to the dining area.

"Good morning, Lady Sai," a maid greeted me.

"Good morning." My eyes lit up. "That looks delectable."

"Today we prepared porridge made with freshly picked spring vegetables and egg."

"I shall dig in, then." I pressed my palms together gratefully before trying the steaming-hot food. The taste of sweet rice, the slightly bitter tang of fresh spring greens, and the fluffiness of the egg came together in a dreamlike combination.

Usually, I exchanged information with the maids during breakfast. Sometimes there was a message from Lord Yukinari afterward.

A maid reported, "The roof of the right wing of the Sekirei Palace will be repaired and cleaned today. As for the items that will be carried in..."

By the time I finished breakfast, I could see the dim light of sunrise outside. That was when Suzuiro would arrive to work, ending my morning routine. What followed depended on the day. As the person in charge of Sekirei Palace, I was rather busy, yet I was glad to be responsible for so many tasks. I was enjoying the most peaceful days of my life.

That day, like every day, the sky was clear as Suzuiro and some maids, as well as a few attendants who were assisting us—weeded the garden.

I approached and said, “Though gardeners come to take care of our plants, from the looks of things, we cannot keep up with the weeds unless we maintain it too, hm?”

“Lady Sai! Your Suzuiro shall try her best before summer is in full swing!”

I smiled. “Thank you. I’m counting on you.”

Sekirei Palace had two patches of nature on its premises: the inner courtyard and the garden. At the moment, both were practically forests of weeds. As for the property’s canals, thanks to the labors of the attendants, clean water flowed through all of them.

“Lady Sai! This area is *full* of chameleon plants!”

“Well, if we slack on upkeep, only the tenacious plants will remain. Even if we cut most of it down all in one go, new ones will probably spring up next year, so let’s do this thoroughly.”

Although we had tidied the spaces somewhat, they still overflowed with weeds and overgrown plants. I had spotted rock plaques that originally guided pedestrians along the paths in the garden, among other things, so the plot must have started off as a gorgeous garden of sophisticated design.

Chatting with Suzuiro and noting her advice, I began to formulate a plan to revive the garden. “It would be nice if we were able to turn this into a small farm for medicinal herbs, but... There’s a lot of snow in this nation, right?”

“Yes, my lady! I don’t know how much snow you get in Centoria, but we are very much a snowy empire! Ah...!” Suzuiro was trekking after me through the tall brush and seemed to be having some trouble.

“Please don’t rush. You’ll end up tripping.”

Regaining her balance, she said, “This city turns pure white in winter!”

“That sounds...like a lot of work.”

“Mages made apparatuses that can remove snow for us, so the capital doesn’t get as buried, but even so, I believe we’ll need to come up with

something if we want to grow our own plants!”

“A greenhouse would be nice.” I paused. “That gazebo is on the verge of collapsing, so we could tear it down and build a greenhouse in its place.”

I pondered our plans for the future as, accompanied by Suzuiro, I headed further into the garden. Unlike within the atrium, outside I was able to discern a surprising number of medicinal herbs amid the tangled foliage.

Suzuiro was picking plants merrily. “Ah, Lady Sai! I found some geranium! This will be useful!” She appeared very invested in what was growing in the garden. “Large-flowered barrenwort and ground ivy too... It seems that the only plants left are the ones that you don’t really have to look after. Ah, this shrub is a red elder! Hmm, are there any flowers around that are just for display...? Oh, look! There are dandelion flowers!”

From what I had heard from Suzuiro, the medicine compounded in Orient was similar to the Japanese herbal medicine of my past life, which had been based on traditional Chinese medicine. The names of the medicinal herbs remained mostly unchanged as well. Yet, although many of the herbs were the same, there were also some I didn’t recognize from my previous life.

I had worked at the Department of Medicine in Centoria, and Suzuiro was the daughter of a family that ran an apothecary business. As one might expect, once we started talking about our respective cultures of medicine, our conversation rolled on and on.



AFTER our walk, we left the garden. Then, while we bundled chameleon plants together and dangled them from Sekirei Palace’s roof to dry, we discussed a frequent topic of ours: cosmetics.

Suzuiro handed a bundle to me as I stood on a stepladder. “Lady Sai, I’ve been curious for the longest time...”

“Yes? Ask away.”

“There are cosmetic alchemists in Centoria, right? What kind of job is that?”

“Oh, that. It’s an occupation in Centoria in which specialists create skin care

products with magic. They custom-make cosmetics for each client and craft unique formulas depending on the individual's needs."

"Make cosmetics...with magic?"

Suzuiro looked puzzled.

Chapter Thirty-One: Cosmetics and Paranormal Activities

SUZUIRO tilted her head in question and asked, “Do you mean, for example, that with a swoosh of their hands over some water, they could turn it into toner?”

“If you skip all the theory, then yes, essentially.”

“Amazing! That means you could make all the makeup in the world! And have tons of stock to sell!”

Her childlike wonder made me smile. “That’s not really how it works.” I shook my head from my position on the stepladder. “Much skill and fine-tuning is required, so mass production is impossible.”

“Aw, that’s a shame.”

“And, well... It is a costly product. Even if you were to manufacture large quantities, the client base is rather limited.”

“Ah, I see! Because there are lots of mages over there, and they can just whip up their own without needing to buy any!”

“Actually, they can’t.”

“Wait, really?”

“Ah, Miss Suzuiro, please pass the next bundle.”

“Yes, my lady!” She stood on tiptoe and handed it up to me.

Taking the sheaf of chameleon plants, I answered her question. “In Centoria you need a license to make cosmetics.”

“Ooh! I didn’t know that!”

“The occupation is that of a magical specialist, after all.” I paused. “Are there no such regulations in Orient?”

“Nope! Here, most every woman makes all kinds of homemade cosmetics,

like toners or ointments or creams!”

“Ah, so it isn’t a consumer product.”

Suzuiro appeared quite cheerful, and I guessed she must really like the subject. Curious, I asked, “Do you make cosmetics too, Miss Suzuiro?”

“Well, our female apothecary employees make some for me sometimes, and my mother also crafts mine personally! Ah, and of course, I know the process too!” She arched her back and puffed out her chest. She was *adorable*. “But makeup made by a professional cosmetic alchemist sounds *sooo* nice... It must make the user look super pretty.”

“Weeeell...”

“Huh? You sound a little iffy about that.”

I could reply in neither the affirmative nor negative, and I looked away, turning my eyes to the chameleon plants swinging slightly below the roof overhang. It was hard to say whether the wares of a cosmetic alchemist made their users shine. In fact, as a mage myself and a professional in the field of magic, I thought them rather meaningless.

There were a few reasons for my judgment. First, the quality of alchemical cosmetics was unstable. Skill was a big factor, of course, and over time, the infused magic would also warp, so any results were inconsistent. Second, the skin age and habits of a client changed with time and environment, meaning the necessary nutrients and treatments shifted constantly as well. A product might be perfect for one’s skin one day and inappropriate the next. More inconsistency.

That said, of all the jobs of mages, the position of cosmetic alchemist was one of the most prestigious. The patronization of a cosmetic alchemist significantly boosted the status of nobles and merchants in Centoria, and noblewomen without one were disdained at social events. Even when the cosmetics didn’t agree with their skin, they still used them. For example...

“For some reason, this has been stinging my skin lately...”

“Congratulations! That is a detox reaction as your complexion improves!”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Yes, yes! If you bear with it and use it for just a little longer, your skin will become as supple as an infant’s!”

...I think you see what I mean.

When burning or reddening occurred after smearing themselves with product, the noblewomen assumed that it was a side effect of a positive transformation. And while the clients continued regular application of what they had on hand, the cosmetic alchemist would secretly modify the formula of the next restock, tweaking it to once again suit the customer. Ultimately, the client would think, “I persisted with this product and became more beautiful! My skin is practically new! My cosmetic alchemist is the best!”

Yeah... That’s what they end up believing, and it’s a big tragedy...

As a result, commoners, who didn’t use magical toiletries, had arguably better skin than nobles. But it was out of the question for noblewomen to go without their special skin care, and the cycle of consumerism repeated like a perpetual machine. *That I am unable to adapt to such charades is probably evidence that I’m nothing more than a country bumpkin.*

As I hung the chameleon plants, I spotted students in the inner courtyard carrying bulky furniture onto the premises. When the youths clad in identical uniforms realized that we were present, they all straightened their backs and raised their voices in chorus, shouting, “Please pardon our intrusion!”

They yelled with the hoarseness of teenagers in the middle of voice changes. They had a refreshing, passionate energy about them, almost like members of a sports team.

I watched them leave, the halo of adolescence shining around them, before remarking aloud an observation that had simmered in my thoughts for a while. “The citizens of Orient have marvelous skin, the men included.”

“You think so?!”

I nodded. “Yes. All of you have pale skin pristine like snow, and everyone’s hair is as lustrous as silk... In my opinion, many people seem younger than their actual age.”

Suzuiro appeared dumbfounded as she squawked, “I have never *ever* thought about that before!”

“...You seem very surprised... You are also very lovely, Miss Suzuiro!”

“Ah, um!” Suzuiro cupped her cheeks with her hands, beet red.

She was a charming, beautiful young girl with snow-white skin, to put it mildly. When she stayed quiet and tilted her head adorably, I could mistake her for a member of an idol group. *Well, since there are beauties left and right here in Orient, they probably don't care as much about looks in comparison.*

I craned my neck to glance up at the sky. “Perhaps everyone here is pale because of the weather.”

The sun was much gentler on the skin compared to in Centoria, and the weather was often cloudy too. Maybe the clement humidity and temperature were kinder to one's complexion. The people of Orient even had the habit of routinely visiting hot springs, so their environment was probably one of the best for skin health.

A little intrigued, I inquired, “In Orient, do most people use homemade skin care products?”

“Yes, my lady! No matter how wealthy you are, in general, the stuff we use is homemade. I've never seen cosmetics sold commercially before... Hmm... Ah, but we do have specialty stores for lipsticks and makeup with pigment!”

“I see...”

“In Orient, we have more than plenty of medicinal herbs and people who are knowledgeable about them, after all!” explained Suzuiro cheerily as she tied up yet another bundle of chameleon plants. “Leftover ingredients from compounding medicine, some products that are a little subpar to be sold in the store, stuff we make for practice... I play around with those and add them to skin care products, sometimes. And well, plant some herbs in the garden, too. That's why buying cosmetics seems like a special thing to me!”

As always, her voice was loud and lively, but compared to the first day, she had calmed down considerably. If that was a sign of her slowly growing used to life with me, I would be over the moon.

“Ah!” she exclaimed. “That reminds me! My mom’s medicine cured my acne too!”

“Oh, I can see the results... You are beautiful and adorable, Miss Suzuiro.”

She let out a bashful giggle. “Lady Sai praised me!”

“Your hair is just as wonderful. You have a wonderful scent too... Is that rosemary oil?”

“Yes, my lady! This was also specially made by my mom!”

Suzuiro’s hair was the color of tin, yet it was very different from hair that had grayed with age. Her silky, deep-silver strands were pulled into a ponytail, straight like a bundle of chrome wires.

I praised her hair, and the honest girl she was, she lit up with happiness. “My mother made my hair oil from herbs she harvested in the garden.”

“She sounds wonderful.”

“Yes, she is! My father is a very scary man, but Mother is always smiling, and I’ve never seen her angry before! I love her to bits!”

“I would love to meet her one day.”

“Ah! Of course, I love my father to bits too!”

I chuckled. “I know, I know.”

Time flew by while I spoke with Suzuiro, and we seemed to finish our work in a flash.

“Cosmetics, hm...?” I muttered to myself.

Until then, I had never thought too much about them—or more accurately, my appearance—besides what was necessary for the Wagtail Priestess. But every morning in Orient thus far, maids diligently painted light makeup on me as I dressed. Whenever the emperor summoned me as his nightly companion, the maids decorated and dressed me to perfection. They were so earnest about crafting a picture of beauty on the canvas of my body, in fact, that I almost felt guilty. After all, I was only going to talk with the emperor and give him mana circuit therapy.

When I'd first studied my reflection in the mirror after they finished, I'd been a little embarrassed by the sight. That had been a first for me. Though I didn't believe I deserved the extra attention, I was going to meet the emperor, so putting effort into my presentation would be more polite. It would be rude to look like the unrefined rustic I was in the presence of a man of such beauty. To be as pleasing to the eyes as I could was one of my duties as the Wagtail Priestess, or so I had concluded.

And in that matter, cosmetics might be a good idea. It won't impede the signature medicinal trade of this country and could also be a good method of earning foreign currency.

Absentmindedly, I stroked my cheeks and whispered, "Maybe I should take this opportunity to attempt to make some."

"Please do! If you're the one making them, Lady Sai, it will *definitely* turn out amazing! Ah, I'll head off to harvest some more chameleon plants!"

Suzuiro dashed off merrily toward the garden. She must have grown up surrounded by boundless love showered on her by her parents and others around her.

And at the same time...I was reminded of my younger self. Of my father, who'd been a doctor, and my mother, the former Wagtail Priestess. In my mother's vegetable garden, we had often cared for the plants together on sunny days. My mother had been a strict woman, yet whenever she'd welcomed my father back from his rounds, her expression had melted like snow in spring. I used to love witnessing that wondrous transformation.

...I couldn't turn back the clock to those halcyon days, but the fact that I could recall them probably meant that I was just as happy as I had been then.

"GAAAH!!"

There was a strangled scream as if somebody had grabbed a bird by the throat. The sound of flapping wings followed as magpies startled into flight.

Suzuiro reappeared. She seemed to have gone weak in the knees, because she was crawling toward me desperately, shrieking, "Lady Sai! A ghost! Th- There was a hand! From the cabinet!!"

Chapter Thirty-Two: What Did That Living Remnant Just Say?!

SUZUIRO'S scream reverberated throughout Sekirei Palace. "Lady Sai! A ghost! Th-There was a hand! From the cabinet!!"

I could hear the hurried footsteps of maids and guards approaching. As for me, I headed toward Suzuiro, who couldn't stand.

Suzuiro stumbled toward me in a half crawl. "L-Lady Sai! There's— There's...!" Her shaky index finger was pointed at a medicine cabinet lined with bottles of dried herbs.

And in the cabinet's shadow, in the corner of the room, sat a woman on the ground. Her silhouette was murky, and I could see through her. The best word to describe her was—

"A ghost!"

Exactly what Suzuiro had just shouted.

"Miss Suzuiro, please calm down. That isn't a ghost of someone who has passed away but a living remnant. Her original is alive."

"Even if she's alive, she's still terrifying!"

I sighed. "I thought I purified all of them, but it seems that I missed one."

"W-Wait, were there...were there loads of *those* around?"

"Well, it's more accurate to say that I thought I had dealt with them before they could evolve to this point. I wasn't thorough enough with my exorcism. It was an oversight on my part."

The thud of footsteps echoed out like an orchestra as maids and guards converged on us from every corner of the palace.

I turned to face them. "Everyone, please distance yourselves from this room." To the maids, I instructed, "Please brew an herb infusion for Miss Suzuiro. Use

the herbs at the very top of that cabinet and add some honey. And Miss Yoshino, please scoop out enough coarse salt to fill a rice bowl along with some tea. Twig tea would be fine. Bring that over once you are done.”

To be safe, it was better to keep people without mana away from the area. I entrusted Suzuiro to a maid, then approached the living remnant.

There were no true ghosts in the world of the game, at least in the sense of a spirit left behind by a human after their death. Most “ghosts” were instead a person’s lingering emotions that had mingled with ambient mana in nature, which caused them to develop a discernible form. Nothing more. From the looks of things, the room contained residual strong emotions that had resisted my initial exorcism.

“Please pardon my intrusion. Hello there,” I greeted the woman.

The living remnant did not stir from her lifeless seat and was murmuring something to herself in a low voice. She looked to be in her twenties. Since she was a mere remnant and her outline vague, I couldn’t make out the details of her attire, but it was definitely a splendid work of art. She had probably been a consort in the former Inner Palace.

I stooped to peer into her face, then waved my hands in front of her eyes. In a gentle voice, I said, “I am going to prepare some tea. It tastes heavenly.”

Silence.

“To sit in such a small corner of the room must be rather unpleasant. How about we take a break together?”

“.....”

“It seems that she can’t hear me...” I muttered to myself.

She was a living remnant with no will. If I sprinkled salt enhanced with mana around her, she would probably disappear without a struggle. *But I purified this room recently. And yet she was still able to take on a visible shape, which means...*

The emotion of the original human is too tenacious... She’s still alive and has never gotten over this attachment, so the remnant will revive no matter how

many times I dispel it. And her original likely has some talent as a mage, at least... That's why her emotions manifest more readily...

I sat down next to the remnant, leaning closer to her mouth in hope of gleaning some information from her mumbling. Almost simultaneously, a maid entered the room—Yoshino, whom I was expecting.

“Lady Sai, here is the coarse salt and roasted tea.”

“Thank you. Please put it over—”

But I didn't finish my sentence, because the words of the living remnant had made me jump.

I sucked in a deep breath. “Wait. Please do not come any closer.”

“Huh?!” Yoshino's eyes widened, and she immediately halted her steps.

“It is...a little dangerous right now, so please stay away. Please leave the items over there. I shall head over to get them myself.”

“Y-Yes, my lady.”

The living remnant was still muttering. *“That cannot be the emperor.”*

I couldn't let her words reach anyone else's ears.

“How could such a...ever be the real emperor...? Never...”

I swallowed nervously, bracing myself for whatever the remnant might say next. *What in the world is she trying to imply?*

“That was a girl, I am sure of it... The Kiriya clan disguised a young daughter of nobility as a man and put her on the throne.”

Chapter Thirty-Three: The Emperor Can't Be a Woman, That's Ridiculous

***“THAT** was a girl, I am sure of it... The Kiriya clan disguised a young daughter of nobility as a man and put her on the throne.”*

“Um, no. That is downright ridiculous,” I couldn’t stop myself from replying.

Yet the remnant was unfazed. *“...will definitely expose...Kiriya clan’s plo...be done for...”* She continued to mumble nonsense to herself, and in truth, I was rather bewildered.

The emperor was definitely a man. No questions asked. He did have a gentle air to him, and one might briefly mistake him for a cross-dressing woman of beauty, but it was pretty clear that he was a man on second glance. He was tall, his voice deep, and his body was that of a man when I touched him in bed. Not to mention the fact that a woman’s musculature could never support those huge wings.

The answer was clear. *But okay, let’s just say that it’s possible somehow, for the sake of argument.* The line of Amawashi traced all the way back to the Myth of Beginning, a lineage of ancient blood with the powerful magic of a deity. Perhaps temporarily switching their gender was a piece of cake for them.

But a mage could not fully conceal their sex even if they changed their constitution with magic because mana circuits were vastly different between men and women. If the mage was originally a woman, their mana centered around their womb. That was why I always pictured drawing magical energy from my navel. In conclusion, because I was a mage myself, the slightest skin contact immediately clued me in to the initial sex of one’s body. So the emperor *was* a man, but...

“That was a girl, I am sure of it... The Kiriya clan disguised a young daughter of nobility as a man and put her on the throne.”

The living remnant was as persistent as weeds in a garden. She must have come across some sort of definitive proof, then.

Into her ear I whispered, “I have had the opportunity to touch His Majesty’s body a few times, and his is that of a man.”

“That was definitely a girl... It is the Kiriya clan’s conspiracy, and...”

“I saw him in bed, so I am very sure.”

“There will definitely be problems with succession... The next emperor has no right to the throne...”

“If I remember correctly, the emperor is meant to be the incarnation of Amawashi, so they wouldn’t have issues with succession like regular humans, or at least that is what I’ve heard.”

“It’s because she’s a girl...hidden the whole time... When I tried to assassinate her, she clearly was a girl...”

“What?!” I did a double take and stared at the remnant with new eyes. “Assassinate...? Um, my apologies, but I think I just heard an outlandish confession...”

“When I tried to assassinate...was a girl, so...I was shaken and failed...”

“Are you sure it wasn’t a trick of the light or a body double?”

“I saw it, I saw it myself... Definitely...”

I sighed. “I’m getting nowhere with this...”

In the first place, her bitterness was so strong that it had evolved into a living remnant—to dissuade her from her “truth” would be difficult. On top of that, it was useless to try to reason with a person—well, living remnant—who claimed to have seen something with their own eyes.

Gazing at the remnant once more, I muttered, “Well, it looks like I’ve gotten all the information I can from her.” I grabbed a handful of the salt that the maid had placed there for me and began to flood my palms with mana. I laced the coarse salt with an enchantment that would sever the ties between ambient mana and the lingering emotions, not unlike how a surfactant could separate a mixture of oil and water. After fiddling with the salt, I dumped it all at once on top of the remnant’s head with a rustle.

“I beg your pardon. Please disappear now, or at least for today.”

Showered with the coarse salt, the remnant slowly faded away.

Once she had completely disappeared, I dedicated the tea in offering and clapped my hands together. That part of the ritual was mostly just for show to quell the unease of the magicless maids. A place scattered with salt would only seem creepy to those who couldn’t see its effects. A formal ritual to make them think that I had dispelled the apparition would provide relief and prevent

unwanted emotions from sprouting in the palace. Anxiety was contagious. A stigmatized property would only accrue more stigma over time.

After I prayed and had waited a while, I called out to the maids in the corridor. “It is all right now. For the time being, please avoid coming into the medicine depository until I say otherwise. And...how is Miss Suzuiro doing?”

“She calmed down after she drank tea.”

“I am very glad to hear that...”

As we were talking, Lord Yukinari suddenly appeared. He didn’t look as if he had rushed over because of the commotion, so his timing was probably just a coincidence.

He addressed me. “I have come with a message from His Majesty summoning you as his nightly companion tonight, yet it seems that you have more urgent matters to attend to right now.”

I nodded and gestured toward the room of the empress consort—my private quarters. “Lord Yukinari, may I have a moment of your time?”

Chapter Thirty-Four: I Get Answers about the Accusation, and Here Comes a Beautiful Woman to Cause Mayhem

I led Lord Yukinari to the second floor of the empress consort’s chambers, where there was a table with a gorgeous view in an optimal location of the tall building.

We could overlook the entire capital of Orient. Fields of harvest stretched beyond the fortress walls that encircled the city, and even further in the distance towered a blue mountain range, its slopes tinted by the atmosphere. If I were to travel past those peaks, I would arrive in my homeland, the Cutrettola demesne, as well as Centoria. The nation of Orient was situated between the ocean and tall mountains and blessed with their protection. The scene before

us depicted that fact clearly.

After a pause, I explained, "There was a commotion regarding a living remnant."

His cool, sharp eyes widened slightly. "A living remnant."

"Yes."

Wind tugged at his long, black hair and indigo-blue garments. "So they did appear in the end."

"I am afraid so. By the way, Lord Yukinari..." I decided to get straight to the point. "His Majesty is a man, right?"

"...Yes, he is." Though he appeared perplexed, he answered my question sincerely. "I believe you know that very well, Lady Sai. I do not see the point in asking me."

"Well, yes."

"Though there is the possibility that you do not view him as a man."

Frantically, I waved my hands from side to side, protesting my innocence. "His Majesty is the emperor. I could never be so disrespectful as to consider him a mere man."

Lord Yukinari went silent for a moment, then resumed conversation as he collected himself. "So, I assume that there must be a reason for you to have gone out of your way to confirm that established fact."

I nodded. "Yes. To tell you the truth, the remnant that appeared today said..."

I told him the entire story: that the remnant was convinced that the emperor was a woman and that she had insisted on that truth. She had also confessed that she once made an attempt on the emperor's life.

"I see..." Lord Yukinari gazed at the magpies flying in the distance, deep in thought. After careful consideration, he muttered, "A rather troubling incident."

"Indeed..." I dipped my head in agreement, looking down at the roasted tea that the maids had prepared. My plan to enjoy the mild weather while enthusiastically thinking about my future cosmetic production line had pretty

much been rudely interrupted by trouble crashing into my face. Instead, for the moment, I focused on the warmth of my teacup and let out a little sigh of peace.

“During the renovation of this place, I saw the layout of the palace, and I can still recall it.” Lord Yukinari’s eyes grew distant as if he was retracing his memories. “The medicine depository used to be the residence of Consort Azusa... Mistress Azusairo of the Akiduki clan.”

“Mistress Azusairo...”

“Her family, the Akiduki clan, is one of the most distinguished merchants of silk in the capital. They do not merely resell wares; they also produce their own. They own factories along the bank of the Nunokawa on the outskirts of the city, where their roster of silk craftsmen and cloth dyers are employed.”

Nunokawa, the Fabric River. I turned and peered toward the city’s edge. The rural landscape, painted in the colors of spring, occupied my eyes first. Beyond that, hazy in the distance, flowed a large river with calm currents. Two major rivers sandwiched the capital, and both emptied into the ocean in the north. One of the river’s distributaries was a narrow channel named the Nunokawa.

As the epithet “Fabric River” suggested, since ancient times, dyers had washed colored silk in its waters. I’d heard that many dyers resided along the river, for which it was famous. I knew of the river, of course, because the emperor happened to have mentioned it in conversation during our journey to the capital. That the Akiduki clan was actually influential enough to own factories’ worth of craftsmen, however, was news to me.

“That is rather impressive. She must have come to the Inner Palace to garner merit for her family.”

Lord Yukinari nodded. “In the end, though, the Inner Palace and harem were rendered obsolete.”

“Right...”

“She left the Inner Palace before it was abandoned, and to my knowledge, after returning to her family, she remarried. But the man who took on her surname clashed with her younger brother about how they should manage the

business. Eventually they divorced, and her husband was chased out of the Akiduki clan.”

“Oh dear...”

“Presently, her younger brother has the final say in the Akiduki clan as the family’s head.”

“That is rather... I cannot even imagine how difficult it must have been for her.”

She had gone back to her family when her first union dissolved, then married a man who was deemed an unfit successor by her relatives. Her younger brother had literally thrown the man out. It must’ve been suffocating.

“I hear that, currently, Mistress Azusairo is the overseer of one of their family-owned weaving factories on the bank of the Nunokawa.”

“I see. So she dedicates her life to her family’s trade now...” From what I could gather, she had not married a third time. “Choosing to join the Inner Palace as a daughter of a merchant family must have been a very difficult decision for her to make...”

And despite her resolution, she’d had to return to her family, then entered a second doomed marriage. And she was still stuck with them. *It’s no surprise that her living remnant is so active.* I wasn’t too sure on the details of disembodied spirits in my previous life, but living remnants in the world of the game were like clones of individuals’ emotions. If the remnant’s original suffered a stressful life, the remnant manifested with higher energy.

“On that topic...” I hesitated. “You are very familiar with the circumstances of the Akiduki clan, Lord Yukinari.”

“I am. The commoner branch of the Kiriya clan—my family’s clan—governs the Silkworm Spirit Shrine. Thus, even if I do not wish to, I learn of the state of affairs of families involved in the silk trade.”

“Wait, does that mean the empress dowager is...”

“My father’s younger sister. The Kiriya and Gou clans have traditionally produced the majority of the empresses in Orient’s history. After the previous

emperor's demise...the empress dowager moved into the shrine dedicated to the silkworm spirits and has remained there ever since."

There was a distinct lack of women within the imperial palace, and I finally had an answer as to why.

"Traditionally," he continued, "the empress does not enter the imperial court, instead living with her birth family. Due to the situation with the previous emperor, however, the empress dowager has chosen to live somewhere far away from the capital so she does not become a source of political unrest."

She probably wanted to prevent the disorder caused by the previous emperor from passing to her son, Emperor Haruka. In a way, I could empathize with her.

"Mistress Azusairo...is a daughter of the Akiduki clan, which operates a silk business. In her eyes, an emperor born from a woman of the Kiriya clan is probably quite an eyesore." Lord Yukinari sighed. "That is why she would experience delusions of assassinating him, trapped as she is inside a cage of groundless beliefs." A grave expression on his face, he sipped the roasted tea slowly.

"I see..." I also took a sip of tea. The breeze was somewhat chilly, dragging out the tail end of spring, and the hot tea warmed me. I was glad that a woman who'd even attempt an assassination on impulse hadn't become the previous emperor's lawful consort. Though many judged him a fool, he at least had been wise enough to select an appropriate empress.

As I carefully sorted through all the information in my head, Lord Yukinari said, "As for the past assassination attempt, we shall take over from here."

"Thank you. Please do."

We couldn't use the testimony of a living remnant as evidence. And in the end, the incident had occurred in the past and never progressed beyond an attempt. It was better to deal with the matter quietly rather than shout the news out loud for the world to know.

"...I have an idea of the approximate date of her attempted assassination."

"Oh, really?"

“Originally, His Majesty pretended to be my...*sibling* for a while.”

“Ah. You two are cousins, right?”

“Yes. His Majesty is identical to his father though, so we do not share any similarities in appearance.” His lips curled into a faint smile. The fondness in his speech was not that of the General of the Left Wing but an affection reserved for close family.

So that’s why Lord Yukinari and the emperor seem closer than regular cousins.

The country’s harem system had been newly established, so the rearing of the emperor’s children by the empress’s family was probably the convention until the reforms of the previous emperor. Nobody would question the legitimacy of the child either: after all, a child who grew wings as they came of age could only be fathered by the emperor.

After a moment of thought, Lord Yukinari said, “I do not know when Consort Azusa left the Inner Palace, but if she is convinced that His Majesty is a girl, she must have seen him during his molting. He went through the molting process to gain his wings, during which it became more difficult to fully hide his identity at the Kiriya estate... That was when we went to the embassy in Centoria.”

He paused. “That was the only time the emperor went outside during the period he disguised himself as a girl. And she must have encountered him somewhere and mistaken him for a girl, and as a result, she still believes that to this day.”

“Not only that, but she has also left behind a pleasant parting gift in Sekirei Palace...” *And I have to clean up her mess.* “I need to do something about that remnant. She frightens people, yet the bigger problem is that other attendants and maids might overhear her confession about that assassination attempt. It might even start a silly rumor that His Majesty is a woman.”

I pondered my priorities. First, I had to perform an exorcism, then think of a strategy to deal with her in case she started showing up again. Lord Yukinari would investigate Mistress Azusairo’s crime, so I would leave that to him. So, what would I do if the rumor mill started gossip that the emperor was a woman...?

I shook my head. “Even if such a rumor were to spread about His Majesty, well... Nobody would take it seriously, but...”

“About that.” He faltered. “Her claim about His Majesty being a woman is, well...” He loosed a small sigh. “How do I put this? It is not exactly right, yet it is not too far from the truth either.”

“Huh?”

“We pretended to be brother and sister, you see. And His Majesty—”

“Hey. Yukinari,” interrupted the voice of a young woman. “What are you talking about with Sai without your beloved cousin around, hmm?”

I nearly jumped in surprise. I turned toward the source of the voice—a bewitching woman stood on the other side of the beaded curtain. She looked as if she could easily ruin a country with her appearance alone. She wore a faint smile, and...I knew that face from somewhere.

Chapter Thirty-Five: The Plot’s Foolish Emperor Escaped, Leaving Behind a “Scapegoat”

A goddess had abruptly materialized. Lord Yukinari pressed his palm to his forehead.

I, meanwhile, was completely confused. “U-Umm...”

“It’s me, Sai.” She beamed at me. Her hair was like ivory silk, her skin fine and white like the purest snow, and her long eyelashes fluttered like butterflies. She looked too beautiful to be real. Not a single smear of makeup or lipstick enhanced her appearance, yet her dignified features were striking nonetheless. She wore baggy garments of white silk in a man’s fashion style. She gazed at me, her ash-blue eyes slightly hooded.

I desperately searched my mind. “You...are not a lady who works at Sekirei Palace. Are you Lord Yukinari’s relative, perhaps?” I turned helplessly to him, and his face was stuck in a frown as if he had drunk overly steeped tea.

Suddenly, realization dawned on me. “Oh! Is she your wife?!”

“No!” exclaimed Lord Yukinari and the mysterious woman at once, furiously shooting down that idea.



“**MY** deepest apologies... I did not recognize you, Your Majesty.” I fell onto my knees and prepared to bow in greeting, and the emperor, who was one size smaller than usual, smiled and waved his hand unconcernedly.

“I’m not Haruka right now. The Wagtail Priestess mustn’t kneel before Yukinari’s younger sister, am I right?”

On his slender wrist was a bracelet—the halo-like crown he always wore on his head. His frame was thinner and more delicate, and the solid, heavy wings of a golden eagle were absent from his back. He seemed to have vanished them with magic.

“Y-Younger...sister...?”

Lord Yukinari sighed and explained, “In the past, he sheltered in my family home while pretending to be my sister, taking on the alias Haruiro.”

The emperor added, “I hid my real identity when I was a child, acting the role of Yukinari’s younger sister instead. My magic was weak when I was young, so when I needed to transform my body to hide my gender, I borrowed the previous emperor’s mana.”

“The previous emperor had a very vast mana pool...”

“People thought him a fool, but, well, he was still a god at the end of the day.”

In voice and visage, the emperor was a woman, yet the way in which he spoke and his mannerisms were preserved. When I interacted with him as the emperor, I had noted how mild-mannered he was for a man, and that same demeanor paired with the appearance of a woman... It actually gave me the opposite impression—more like that of a tomboy—and the difference was pretty intriguing. He somehow reminded me of actors in the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female theatre troupe famous in my past life in which, naturally, women performed the male roles as well.

The emperor grinned. “Nobody would suspect that I was the crown prince if I was a woman without wings, right?”

“So that is how it is...” Suddenly, the reason behind his lack of veil occurred to me. “When you change your appearance, you can also suppress your mana, am I correct?”

“Yep. When I’m transformed, even if I meet Yukinari’s eyes without my veil, I won’t burn them.” As he spoke, the emperor sat down on an empty rattan chair. The moment he settled into it, his wings broke free from his back, unfurling their fluffy feathers as he reverted to his normal form. He adjusted the circlet on his head, and the veil wafted down over his face. Intertwining hints of patchouli and sandalwood permeated the air—the emperor’s fragrance.

“Is it that easy to change your appearance...?” I asked, hesitant.

“In the case of gender and age, yeah, though it doesn’t last even half a day. I’m only half human, after all. Whenever I need to assume a different identity, most of the time, I pretend to be a young male attendant, just like this.” The emperor’s body shifted, morphing into a younger version of himself in the blink of an eye.

His voice a distinct, slightly hoarse boy soprano, he continued, “But, well, changing my age is more troublesome than turning into a woman. Plus, people who know what my face looks like would instantly recognize me in this form.” He turned into a woman once more and smiled at me. “Which means that this one’s more useful. Makeup helps too.”

“That makes sense... When you appear as the emperor, people cannot make out the details of your face due to your veil. If I did not know what you looked like, I probably wouldn’t be able to put two and two together...”

“Exactly. And a woman’s body is best in terms of price-performance ratio, since it depletes the least mana.”

A lightbulb of realization lit up in my mind. “Did you possibly establish Sekirei Palace to grant you more freedom of choice?”

His ivory bangs swayed as he dipped his head. His lips, void of any cosmetic

decoration, pulled up with a satisfied curl. “Yes. At present, a court lady would stand out within the imperial grounds, but in the future, I could slip around without a care thanks to Sekirei Palace.”

Lord Yukinari chose to interrupt at that point. “Haruiro.” He sounded as if he were admonishing a younger sister. “If you came here merely to make small talk while dressed in the robes of the emperor, it would be disrespectful.”

“Yeees, my dearest brother,” the emperor replied in a singsong, high-pitched voice, clearly with the intent of lighthearted teasing. He returned to his original form, and his wings stretched out once again, stirring up a small breeze that ruffled the white silk.

“So, Sai.” Piercing eyes of ashen gray focused on me. “How do *you* want to deal with this incident?”

Thinking, I said, “Well, first things first...”

Both of them looked at me.

I decided to address the most pressing issue on my mind. “Your Majesty,” I began.

“Hm?”

“I have been observing the movements of your mana since you came in.”

He looked lost. “Y-Yeah, and?”

“Firstly, you used your right hand to channel your mana, did you not?”

“.....”

“When you turn into a woman, you start by funneling mana into your wings. You apply pressure to them with your magic, pushing them forcefully into your shoulder blades and compacting them. Then you expand from that stream of mana and change your skeleton step by step, starting from your back. You do the same when you take on your youthful form. The problem is... What you are doing is no different from a caterpillar going through metamorphosis into a butterfly. You turn yourself into a chrysalis, break your entire body down into a jumble, then reassemble it into something completely different.”

“S-Sai...?”

“And now that I have spoken the process aloud...I am forced to see how much you burden your body just to maintain your public image, in more ways than one. Just thinking about it makes me shudder.”

I stared right into the emperor's eyes. Beside him, Lord Yukinari nodded and urged me on with eyes that practically begged me to resume my barrage.

Frowning, I said, “Your Majesty, please do not do more than you have to unless you are forced by circumstance. I understand that given your status and the consequences of gazing upon your face, even the simple act of moving around the imperial palace must be filled with many difficulties.” I paused. “Even when you exchange words with Lord Yukinari, you have the habit of looking away.”

“You have keen eyes.” Then the emperor shook his head. “No. You can look directly at my face, after all. You'd notice it eventually, one way or another.”

“I understand that you are trying to create an environment that allows you more freedom with your transformation so you can prevent the unlikely scenario that you cause harm to others. Yet if your compassion means sacrificing your own lifespan, I... As the Wagtail Priestess, I cannot allow that to happen.”

My purpose was to protect the emperor. To protect his life.

His head inclined, and the veil shifted, revealing his ash-blue eyes through the gaps in the fabric. Then...

“Sorry, I really made you worry, huh?” He smiled warmly. “I wanted you to see, Sai, so that...you're not disappointed when I show you a different form later on.”

“Your Majesty...”

“No matter what I look like, I'm me.”

A twinge of melancholy seemed to echo in those words, and I tilted my head, slightly confused. But then it came to me. The emperor had demonstrated his transformation out of consideration for me, who was unused to how special his powers were.

“My deepest apologies for worrying you, but please do not be concerned. No matter what appearance you take, I can tell that you are still the same person, that you are still you. For humans with magic circuits, changes in outer appearance do not matter at all.”

“Sai...”

“I am sorry for saying something so impertinent. Your Majesty... Thank you very much for caring about me.” Then, in a voice that brooked no objection, I insisted, “Please allow me to treat you thoroughly tonight.”

“...O-Okay.”

“Ahem.” Lord Yukinari cleared his throat. “Your Majesty, Lady Sai. What shall we do about the living remnant?”

I spoke up. “May I offer my thoughts on the matter?”

I explained the idea I had.

“That...would indeed be the safest and fastest solution,” Lord Yukinari muttered.

Chapter Thirty-Six: Living Remnants Are Only Scary Because They Look Like Ghosts

A week passed by in a blur after our discussion regarding measures to deal with the living remnant and any consequent rumors. Every single day, I was pressed for time, rushing to dispel the remnant and carry out preparations for a certain plan.



“**SO**, if I show up with Yukinari’s ‘sister’ during the Houshoku Festival, that will clear up all the weird misunderstandings, that’s what you mean, right?”

The Houshoku Festival, literally the “Weaving Dedication Festival,” was an event held at the Amawashi Shrine Palace in early summer. During the ceremony, every prefecture in Orient presented silk goods to the emperor, and in return, the emperor granted them silk threads that silkworm spirits had just

spun earlier that spring. The average citizen was allowed to spectate the ritual, and of course, the Akiduki clan would attend as well since their trade was in silk wares.

Beginning that year, I would also participate in the Houshoku Festival as the Wagtail Priestess, my role to offer prayers that requested the longevity of the silkworm spirits and the prosperity of Orient. A few female weavers would apparently also serve as priestesses, and because maids and court ladies hadn't been a part of the current imperial court until Sekirei Palace was established, the women summoned to perform the rites were the daughters of either bureaucrats or merchant families. The closest comparison I could think of was that of workers called in as temporary part-timers during peak season.

"I would also like to ensure people notice the contrast between the stature of Your Majesty and Lady Haruiro during the festival," I explained.

To make things easier for the emperor, who planned on taking advantage of Sekirei Palace to walk around the imperial complex as a woman, we needed to convince everyone that the emperor and the younger sister of Lord Yukinari were different people. As long as that impression was planted firmly in everyone's minds, what the living remnant inside Sekirei Palace said wouldn't pose a problem, no matter the claim.

"And to do that," I continued, "we need to find the most conspicuous opportunity possible to have Your Majesty stand next to someone as a woman—as Lady Haruiro. Then when that person stands next to you in your true form, thereby demonstrating how different your build is, people will think that you are two different people."

"And while that's happening, I can just leave a body double at my seat. They'll hide their face, so as long as they have a similar physique, the disguise should suffice. Right, big brother of mine?"

Lord Yukinari ignored the emperor completely.

The emperor looked at me and smiled. "Okay, let's go with your plan, Sai."

I hesitated. "Are you sure? I have not given it much thought, nor am I a wise strategist..."

“But you can handle the remnant at least, right?”

“Yes.” I could nod confidently on that front.

“That’s the most important thing. Especially if we want Sekirei Palace to operate smoothly in the future.”

“...Understood.”

My pulse quickened. Was it really going to be that easy? Then again, worrying wouldn’t change anything. At any rate, before the festival began, my priority was to dispatch the living remnants inside Sekirei Palace.



FIRST on my list was another examination of the entire palace. Through my investigation, I discovered a total of five locations where tenacious emotions clung on as living remnants. I had missed them during my initial purifying session back when Sekirei Palace was still referred to as the former Inner Palace, and my guess was that the building’s state of ruin had muted their presence.

Most paranormal activity ceased in response to human activity. Ghosts weren’t souls or human spirits; they were, in the end, merely clumps of stagnant mana. When humans came and went more often, any accumulated mana would disappear. In the case of living remnants, however, sometimes the increased energy of a place catalyzed their development and created a bigger problem instead. I had learned that when I lived in Centoria.

I unrolled the floor plans of Sekirei Palace across the desk and started to draw circles with light brushstrokes, muttering, “Perhaps we should think of ways to coexist with the remnants...” I had gathered documents about the former Inner Palace from various relevant departments of the imperial court, and Suzuiro had sorted through them for me.

“C-Coexist?!” she yelped. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“Yes,” I replied with a nod. “Honestly, it’s impossible to lead a life without distress. That is especially true with regard to women whose emotions are so strong that they take root and turn into living remnants. Such people probably struggle with depression countless times throughout their lives, which actively

nourishes their remnants.”

Suzuiro whimpered.

“Of course, I’ll investigate their current circumstances and environment and do what I can to resolve their anxieties in the present,” I reassured her.

I glanced at the assembled records. They were a wealth of data concerning all the people who had played a part in the Inner Palace before resigning—ladies-in-waiting and maids in addition to the consorts. I could also glean details of their lives after they left. That said, I had only archival documents. I needed to collect more recent information as well.

“If we relieve their anguish, the living remnants should also weaken somewhat. And, at the same time...”

Suzuiro stared at me with her round eyes. “And...?”

“We can change everyone’s impression of these remnants and make them think, ‘Even if a living remnant shows up, the ones in Sekirei Palace aren’t scary at all!’ Or something along those lines.”

“B-But no matter where it is, it’s scary!”

“Why are you so scared of living remnants?”

Trembling, Suzuiro hugged herself, perhaps remembering the incident. “I-I mean, how could I not be scared? If something suddenly appears in the corner of the room, it makes me jump. And it even looks scary...” She whimpered.

I giggled softly. Her reasoning was sound. After all, living remnants were clearly abnormal occurrences that had no place in day-to-day life. Which meant that I simply had to turn those “abnormalities” mundane.

“You know, human eyes are surprisingly unreliable,” I murmured, recalling the emperor in his female form. Even when the emperor had the appearance of a woman, it was just that—an appearance, not unlike a change of clothes. It didn’t mean he was truly a woman within.

I could work off that principle. With the right tool, I could transform the visual aspect of living remnants such that, even if they formed, they didn’t look like ghosts.

I made a small incision on my fingertip. After mixing the welling blood with charcoal, I began to write characters on rectangular strips of traditionally crafted paper.

Suzuiro leaned in. “Is that...a talisman?”

“Yes. I’m going to set up some small magical apparatuses in Sekirei Palace.” Finishing the last stroke, I stood up. “I’ll head off to exorcise the living remnants, then.”

“Understood, my lady! What shall Your Suzuiro do?”

“The gardeners should be arriving soon to do their regular maintenance. Please receive them, confirm the locations they will plant the trees, and deliver these detailed instructions.” I held out the garden plans.

Suzuiro straightened before accepting them. Though sometimes it was easy to forget, she was the daughter of a family that ran an apothecary business. She was surprisingly thorough and paid attention to detail in her duties. I was sure that the garden was in good hands.

We parted ways, and I headed toward where the living remnant was running rampant, a “Keep Out” notice posted on the door. I entered to find Mistress Azusairo’s living remnant floating off the ground in a corner of the room. That day, like every day, she was hugging her knees in a seated position, mumbling curses to herself.

“She seems as lively as always...” I grumbled.

I approached the area where she lurked and stuck the talisman to the wall in a place that would be hidden from sight, blocked by the cabinet. I reopened the wound on my fingertip and let a drop of blood amass before it splashed down onto the remnant.

“The Wagtail Priestess commands you. You will never take on that appearance again.”

Trickles of blood trailed down the inhuman remnant and started to glow faintly. The projection warped and shifted before finally settling on the form of a fluffy magpie. It chattered noisily.

...Sekirei Palace is literally “Wagtail Palace,” yet for some reason, the birds that loiter around here are all magpies. In that case, even if there’s one or two more magpies around, they won’t draw anyone’s attention. And if it can only chatter... Nobody will be able to comprehend its words.

The magpie puffed up its feathers, trying to say, “The emperor...is a girl...” But all that emerged was incoherent jabbering.

I chuckled. “Okay, I think I can have some peace of mind now.”

After dealing with that remnant, I visited all of the “haunted” spots around the palace and put up talismans, turning all the women into magpies. Living remnants arose when the lingering attachment of a person with some aptitude for magic mixed with ambient mana in the environment—the substance that had manifested that snow dragon. Consequently, I could just adjust their outward countenance with a talisman.

A magpie living remnant, in the end, was still a remnant. That didn’t change. They couldn’t be touched, nor could they fly far from Sekirei Palace. They were like holograms. So I hadn’t removed the root of the problem; remnants still occupied the palace. Yet dressed up as birds, they wouldn’t be mistaken for ghosts, and nobody would fear them. In fact, they might even be celebrated, since magpies brought luck and happiness. All that was left to do was to wait for the remnants to dissipate as the atmosphere naturally changed over time.

“Which means the living remnant incident is case closed.”

I exited the building and headed toward the bridge that also served as the entrance to the palace grounds. I called out to the brawny male attendant there. He was smoking a *kiseru*, a type of Japanese pipe from my previous life.

“Excuse me. I want to visit the document archives. Would it be all right if we took the rickshaw?”

“Of course, Lady Priestess!”

He rose and merrily readied the one-seat rickshaw that was parked to one side. The vehicle was pretty much the type one would see at a tourist site in my previous life. I had constructed the improvised rickshaw with magic, using a wheelbarrow, a chair from inside Sekirei Palace, and an umbrella.

Travel by palanquin seemed too pretentious and caused too much trouble, in my opinion. Not to mention that the number of buff male attendants needed to carry me each time seemed wasteful. And so I had created the rickshaw, and it was much more comfortable than my initial estimations and also very convenient.

After I climbed in, the attendant asked me from over his shoulder, “Where do you wish to go, my lady?”

“To the Department of Print, please.”

“Right away! Please sit tight!”

He broke into an enthusiastic sprint. I admired the scenery blurring by, and as the wind streamed past my body, I began to ponder the women who produced the remnants. *Mistress Azusairo is quite a dangerous woman, but the others...*

The women who had been consorts were currently in their thirties to early fifties. They had all been thoroughly educated in preparation to join the harem and were dignified women exceptional in both ability and the intricacies of socialization. Yet even if they had returned to the city after leaving the Inner Palace, in Orient, the skills and knowledge gained in the harem probably hadn't been of much help.

Feminism was prevalent in Oriental society, and in terms of work especially, but only among the commoners. There were few occupations in which the aforementioned abilities could shine, as seen from the lack of ladies-in-waiting or maids in the imperial court.

I suspected that many of the women felt out of place or that they had to tread carefully after they returned to the urban environment. After all, the Inner Palace itself had become a black smear on the history of the empire.

But their abilities and knowledge were important to *me*.

Documents and words on paper won't do... I need to investigate more and learn more about them. And I have the perfect excuse to probe into matters outside the imperial palace too...

Gently, I rubbed my fingertips together. A citrus scent wafted up from my fingers, for I had coated my hands with a balm I had only just finished making.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Infamy of the Previous Emperor, the Truth, and Horse Sashimi

AFTER dispatching the remnants and gathering what information I could readily find about the consorts that were their origin, I decided to proceed to the next stage: asking direct sources for honest, personal opinions that wouldn't be found in reports.

As for the aims of my inquiries, well... The primary was to look into any rumors about the emperor and keep an eye out for other outlandish gossip. The second was to research the skin care market so I could eventually procure the funds needed to run Sekirei Palace myself. I planned on investigating both at the same time.

I couldn't learn about either of those subjects from the male court officials who had compiled the necessary documents for me or the traveling salesmen who sold medicine. When women were concerned, most of the time it was impossible to discover the naked truth from official sources. One had to approach the matter from another angle.

I set my sights on the imperial court first. I summoned the maids of Sekirei Palace, saying that I wanted people to test the hand balm I had made as a trial product.

The emperor would be the first topic of my probe. From what I knew, the maids all seemed to adore and worship him with the passion of idol fans. Though a veil obscured his face, he exuded an aura of refinement, grace, and gentleness. They had the opportunity to observe such a wonderful person from a close distance, so honestly, I could understand their adoration.

I chose to bring him up casually. "Everyone really holds the emperor in high esteem, I see. I have never heard even one bad rumor about him."

The moment I mentioned the emperor, the maids suddenly became very talkative, rambling on and on with sparkling eyes.

“Of course! It’s *the* emperor we’re talking about!”

Their enthusiasm was a sight to behold. I did my best to not speak unless necessary and listened attentively as I let them take over the flow of conversation.

“If there is truly anyone who would gossip maliciously about the emperor... Oh, the *outrage*! The only possible candidates are supporters of the previous emperor or those who reaped many benefits during his reign. But His Majesty is very good at managing those people too.”

“Um, pardon me, but...” Working up some courage, I cut into the conversation. “If it is all right with you, there is something I would like to ask. What does everyone think about—” I hesitated. “—the previous emperor?”

It was something I had been wondering about for a long time. Though the question had nothing to do with rumors surrounding the current emperor, I asked nonetheless.

The maids all looked at one another, seeming to engage in a silent exchange with their eyes.

“Of course, I swear by the blood of the Wagtail Priestess that I shall never disclose any information that anyone shares with me here,” I promised.

“...Well, where should we start...?”

In tandem, they began to tell me about the previous emperor, and the others would interject whenever something came to mind.

“Oh, it was terrible during his reign. There was a big locust plague in Occidenia to the west that spread to the western part of Orient. Many villages there suffered horribly. The snow was also tyrannical in winter, and even the capital, which has been under the divine protection of Amawashi since the beginning of our empire, saw many damaged properties and casualties due to the bulky snow.”

“Everyone said that he incurred the wrath of Amawashi because he established the harem...”

“Exactly! Until his generation, the only occasion when women entered the

imperial grounds was whenever the villas for the empresses were under construction. The tradition was that only the maids and ladies-in-waiting who worked there would be allowed in as exceptions...”

I couldn't help but interrupt. “P-Please wait...” I almost felt as if they had thrown a bomb in my direction. “Um, if I have this right... Before the previous emperor, the only woman permanently allowed to enter the imperial complex was the empress, is that correct?”

“Yes,” one maid replied, and everyone nodded with her.

“Of course, women would come in for rites or festivals, but nobody lived here.”

They were discussing mind-blowing information with smiles on their faces. There was even some...warmth, I thought, in their eyes, as if they were envisioning something that warmed their hearts.

“Um, I ended up living here, and now Sekirei Palace has been established... Wouldn't anyone think that...this would incur the wrath of Amawashi?” I asked nervously.

“It's perfectly fine, Lady Sai. You're the Wagtail Priestess, after all.”

“The records of our legends even indicate that the priestess lived on the imperial premises since she personally taught Amawashi about what it meant to be human.”

My voice came out shaky. “R-Really?”

“Yes. Before His Majesty welcomed you to the empire, he made a public announcement through the Department of Print about its precedence in ancient times.”

I nodded slowly. “I see... So the Wagtail Priestess is an exception.”

For some reason, they all shared meaningful smiles. *Why are they doing that?* I wondered, but that question was left to collect dust in the back of my mind.

To sift through all the accounts dating back to the Myth of Beginning and manage to find lore that even I, the Wagtail Priestess, hadn't known about must've been more challenging than I could ever imagine. The court official

from the Department of Print who had tackled the task was likely a very capable subordinate. In my head, I thanked and acknowledged that official, whose face was a mystery to me. I hoped that I could express my gratitude in person one day.

A maid added, “The commoners were filled with frustration and unease during the previous emperor’s reign. Natural disasters were frequent, and the government’s reaction and aid during these disasters were always too many steps behind. According to my husband, the imperial court was a breeding ground for unrest as well.”

I frowned. “May I ask for more details?”

“Apparently, the previous emperor made many unprecedented decisions in terms of personnel. One of his closest advisors, the Right Legate, wasn’t selected from the Great Three—the Kiriya, Gou, or Kanori clans. Not only that, but he did the same for many of his vassals and even allowed commoners to assume the seats of lower-ranked court officials... I hear that he made many other radical choices of people as well, and that shocked the families that had traditionally served the emperor.”

As they talked, I sorted through the information in my mind.

The previous emperor had been bold with his choice of vassals so he could reform the imperial court. The political atmosphere in Orient had likely been very conservative, stuck within the confines of hereditary succession and convention. He’d wished to upend the bureaucracy from its very foundation, or at least that was my guess. But he hadn’t done enough prior preparation to allow his subjects to come to terms with those changes, and they had been such drastic reforms that no one could catch up.

As a result, the emperor and his vassals had experienced issues with coordination. And as they say, when it rains, it pours, and natural disasters of a scale so severe that people attributed them to the wrath of Amawashi slammed Orient one after another. Because the government wasn’t functioning very well, a late response to the calamities was inevitable, so the commoners endured additional hardship. That was the impression I had, anyway.

Hmm, yet if I remember correctly, commoners can still test their way into the

bureaucracy via exams organized by the court. Which means that not all the reforms of the previous emperor were reversed.

The highway that I had traveled to Orient would also have been a major construction project that started before Emperor Haruka ascended the throne. But everyone credited and praised Emperor Haruka for that accomplishment. The previous emperor had shouldered more blame and hate than he had to. *Why?*

A maid spoke up hesitantly. “But... The worst was probably, you know...”

“Yeah.”

A shadow fell over their faces, and they nodded to one another, the motion almost rehearsed.

A maid muttered, “The Wicked Fox of Septentrion.”

My eyes widened. “Septentrion in the north...? But didn’t the country collapse a few centuries ago?”

They seemed to skirt around my question and replied with false cheer, as if they hadn’t mentioned anything important. “Nah, well, it’s nothing major, really.”

“At any rate, after Emperor Haruka took over, public infrastructure majorly improved, our diplomatic relations with Centoria are thriving, and the lives of merchants, farmers, bureaucrats, and so on are much more fulfilling. So we’re very happy.”

A middle-aged maid nodded deeply in agreement as she said, “It’s safer out there in the streets, and it’s much easier for the traveling medicine merchants to come and go too.”

“And it’s the same for us, the maids of the former Inner Palace! We’ve been granted the chance to work at the palace once again. It might seem like a small thing to others, but to have our career history acknowledged made a big difference to us.”

I smiled. “I am very happy that everyone thinks that.” Once more, I vowed in my heart to protect Sekirei Palace at all costs.

Then I moved on to the main event. “...And this might be a slight change of topic, but there’s something I would like to show everyone...” I picked up a box made from empress tree wood that I had placed beside me. I opened it to show the maids its contents: inside were seashells that could be found in the surrounding oceans that I had filled with balm.

A maid stared at them, fascinated. “Oh? This is...”

“Everyone is always working so hard with scrubbing and washing, and, well... If it is all right with you all, please use this as protection against rough hands,” I explained.

Petroleum jelly didn’t exist in the world of the game. Instead, I had used beeswax and mixed in a little bit of horse oil imported from Meridiona. Then, with peppermint harvested from the garden, I made some peppermint oil before combining all the ingredients into a hand balm.

For the peppermint oil, I had collected around one kilogram of peppermint that had been growing wildly in the garden and extracted the oil through steam distillation. I had only gotten a pitiful amount of oil from that, however, so I used a bit of magic to enhance the peppermint oil’s properties—the scent and other benefits of peppermint as well as the effects of menthol.

As for ingredients such as horse oil and beeswax, since Orient was famous for its medicine production, I was able to obtain them easily. In fact, I had been rather surprised by the ready availability of horse oil. Apparently, horse sashimi figured in Meridiona’s culinary culture, so horse oil was also one of their major exports. In Orient, meanwhile, horse wasn’t part of a normal diet, and the oil was viewed as slightly repulsive. Due to the lack of demand for it, I had managed to get my hands on some for a much lower price than expected.

Personally, I hoped to have more options in terms of scent in the future, but at the moment, the best I could do was utilize the medicinal “weeds” in the garden.

The maids appeared to react rather favorably.

“Wow... This feels really cool and refreshing.”

“The first thing that comes to mind when I think about balms is medicine; I

never thought it could be used for skin care. This is such a marvel.”

“If you apply it after work or after a bath, the scent will have a relaxing effect,” I offered.

“Ah, I see! Oh, it would be great to use it on days when we prepare seafood or do some intensive cleaning. My fingers would smell nice.”

“Thank you so much, Lady Sai.”

The maids applied some to their fingertips, then stretched and studied their fingers happily.

Seeing an opening, I outlined my plan. “I am considering making such products in the future and, well...selling them to nations other than Orient.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Foolish Emperor Who Ran Away Never Existed

THE conversation with the maids just kept going, and by the end, it felt as if they had been raving about the emperor for a full two or three hours. The actual duration was probably shorter if I timed it with a clock though. Of course, I could only listen in a daze, reminded of the enthusiastic figurine collectors and idol fan base from my previous life.

“That was, wow... Whoever becomes the emperor’s wife will have a rough time...” I muttered. Unless the candidate was a very reputable figure in society, the backlash would be terrifying.

It was noon, and I had set time aside to be alone. I was making tea in a lidded teacup and enjoying a moment of respite on the second floor of my chambers. The breeze had started to have a lick of warmth in it of late as well as carry the chirping of insects.

“Summer’s coming soon, huh?”

I could still smell a hint of peppermint from the balm on my hands, and the warm air of early summer paired well with the refreshing scent. I lifted the back

of my hand to my nose, basking in the fragrance as I considered the events of the day.

I don't think there are any bad rumors about the emperor circulating among the maids. The women could've been putting up a front since I was the Wagtail Priestess, but such a ruse would be difficult to perfectly maintain over the two or three hours our discussion seemed to have lasted. I couldn't imagine their enthusiasm was faked.

Doing some investigation outside the imperial court is what I'd like to do next, but...

Unfortunately, as someone who had only just moved to Orient from a foreign country, I had no connections—aside from Suzuiro, that is. Her family, which ran an apothecary shop, was very influential and a household name in the capital. If I utilized her contacts, reaching out to women in merchant families likely wouldn't be that difficult.

My mind wandered back to the zealous commentary regarding the emperor, which the maids had been eager to share. Their words echoed tenaciously in my head. They really spoke like devout believers of a god.

"He is so gorgeous, so normally, you'd think he'd be ridden with scandals, but he is as dignified as the divine emperor he's supposed to be, so there aren't even any rumors in that respect!"

"Well, even if somebody did have unsavory intentions, no one can work up the courage to talk to him so recklessly."

"He is a noble and dignified man! And more than anything, if you catch even a peek of his visage through the gaps in his veil... All women would be left speechless in awe."

"He really is a living god among humans."

When I heard their remarks, I had nodded internally. The emperor was beautiful. His face played a big part, of course, but it wasn't just that. His demeanor, his mannerisms... No matter what aspect of him one observed, each was a work of divine art crafted to be adored and worshipped.

But at the same time... I had felt mournful for some reason, perhaps against

my better judgment. When the emperor was with Lord Yukinari as Lady Haruiro, he'd looked as if no weight wore on his shoulders, as if he were a carefree *human*. Even when in the company of the cousin with whom he could trust his life, the emperor could only act familiar when in disguise as his cousin's younger sister.

The emperor was exceptional at being the sacred deity that his people expected him to be. And...that was why I prayed for more people he could be human around—as just Lord Haruka. *If I am one of those people to him... That would make me really happy.*

“But I must say,” I mumbled to myself, “Lord Yukinari and His Majesty are very close. I bet that when they were young, they probably acted without a shred of reservation toward each other... Haha.”

A soft voice entered my ears. “Saaai.”

“Ah!” I yelped, twisting to find the emperor in his usual male form. “Your Majesty!” I prepared to kneel, but he stopped me.

“Shh, keep it down. I snuck out, and I don't want people discovering that,” he said, stretching his wings as he sat beside me. He smiled. “Seems like you've been pretty busy, huh? Thank you.”

“Ah, it was no bother at all.”

“I saw the magpies. I never thought you'd turn the remnants into those. Now there won't be any more eerie rumors about this place.”

I hesitated. “Your Majesty...”

“Hm?”

“Please allow me to confirm something. For the time being, you have no intention of taking someone as your empress, right?”

The emperor seemed to freeze. A wind blew through the lofty building, caressing his hair and garments of white silk. Our eyes met, our gazes locked together for a long time. After a lengthy silence, the emperor said slowly, “At the moment, that isn't going to happen, yes.”

“I see. That is even more reason to dispel troublesome rumors, then.” I

nodded as things clicked in my mind. “If you had an empress at your side and were expecting children, I thought there would be no need for you to appear as Lady Haruiro during the festival, but since that is not the case...”

“That’s still far in the future... For me to have an empress, and even further for any children.” He sounded almost as if he could look into that future. He shifted his crossed legs, switching the leg that was on top, his eyes narrowing slightly in the draft.

There was something that I’d been wondering in the back of my mind, and I decided to voice my question. “Say, this might be an extreme solution, but...”

“Go ahead.”

“Would it be difficult to make a public announcement that gender doesn’t matter to you because you’re a god?”

“Oh, that... That’s completely out of the question.” He shook his head resolutely. “The real reason why the emperor can change his appearance is, well... If the empire collapses, or if I’m killed during a rebellion, people must not find out that I died.”

Reflexively, I sucked in a sharp breath.

“It’s the natural thing to do.” He smiled. “Because I’m the divine emperor, poison doesn’t work on me, and I won’t die from stabbing unless it’s really bad. But if someone chops off my head, or I suffer so many wounds that my healing can’t keep pace, or my mana pool dries up, I will die. We are told that the emperor’s ability to change appearance exists for the moment of our death. After all, gods must not die. Even if I do die, as long as the dead body there isn’t ‘me,’ faith in Amawashi will not waver.”

My lips trembled, yet no words made it out of my throat. I felt as though I had suddenly lost my sense of smell and touch, and I had to prevent myself from toppling over.

The emperor smiled. Again. “Aw, don’t look like that, it’s not like I’ll die right now or anything. I have you, after all, Sai.”

“.....”

“Sai?”

I felt as if my hearing had been snatched away as well. The shivering of my body wasn't due to the reason he'd assumed.

When my house burned down, and he had rescued me, a certain memory had surfaced—part of the plot of the game from my previous life. The emperor in the narrative had been mocked as a foolish ruler who fled while leaving behind a scapegoat. *But that's not true. Even in the story I read in my past life... He didn't run away. The “body double” who died was...truly him.*

Back then, I had skipped through the cutscenes without much care for the content on my second and subsequent playthroughs. The plot was, in the end, written from the point of view of the heroine—the Saint of Centoria.

A destroyed plaza. Lightning. Torrential rain. White silk sullied with mud. Deathly pale skin and disheveled ivory hair. Those were the final moments of the scapegoat that the Foolish Emperor had abandoned in the imperial court. But the man hadn't been a scapegoat. The truth, even in that work of fiction, was that the emperor had never run away from his duties.

If... If something big does happen in Orient, it's...it's actually possible that he'll be killed and labeled the Foolish Emperor...

“Sai?”

Hearing my name, I snapped out of my thoughts. The emperor was leaning toward me and watching me worriedly. Ash-blue eyes framed by long eyelashes filled my vision.

I seemed to have spaced out, and I took a moment to collect myself. “My most sincere apologies. I was thinking about what would happen if a tragic fate were to befall you, and I lost my composure...”

“I see... I can tell that you care a lot about me. Thank you.” The corners of his eyes seemed to soften a little with his small smile. Then, in a gentle voice, he commanded, “Sai, I'm craving some tea. Could you fetch some warm tea for me?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I stood up from my seat, bowed, then headed down the stairs toward the kitchen. I was grateful for the opportunity he'd given me to

clear my head.

On my way there, I glimpsed Suzuiro with her back to me. She appeared to be sorting medicinal herbs that she'd harvested. She was working happily while animatedly chatting with a maid, and at the sight of that precious fragment of my normal life, I felt my chest ease. My breathing calmed.

I shook my head, chiding myself, "No. Don't let those memories consume you. Don't."

Briskly, I walked into the kitchen and asked the maid presiding over the stew for some hot water.

She looked at me concernedly. "Are you feeling all right, Lady Sai? Your face is awfully pale."

"I am fine. I was just a little cold." I hesitated. "Could you please prepare two portions of tea, for me and...a *guest*?"

"But of course. Please take a seat, I shall bring it over once I am done."

I held the cup of hot water with both of my hands and shut my eyes. *I can't believe this. Imagining a single death was enough to turn me into this state. I'm a failure as the Wagtail Priestess...*

The emperor's death could not—*would* not—come to pass. I would protect him, I swore. That was my resolution, yet fear had overtaken me nevertheless. *I don't want to lose any more people dear to me because of my powerlessness.*

Returning the cup to the maid, I lightly slapped my cheeks. Then, with the tea, I returned to the upper floor, where I found the emperor stroking his wings as he waited for me.

"My apologies for the wait, and... Please allow me to apologize for my loss of self-control."

Fidgeting with a stray feather, the emperor shook his head slowly. "No, I should be the one to say sorry," he said. He reached out and tucked the feather into the hair behind my ear. "I have a good idea. Here, have this. It fell out."

"Is this...?"

"My feather, yeah. You could turn it into a hair ornament or some other

accessory. As long as you have it, you can pretty much go to any part of the imperial grounds without asking for prior permission.”

Instinctively, I pulled it out from behind my ear and studied it under the light. The large golden eagle feather was infused with magic, and when looked at from a certain angle, it shimmered as if it had been dusted with powdered gold. One could instantly tell that it was different from a common bird feather.

“This is such a precious item... Are you sure?”

“During your investigations, you’ve needed to fill out an application every time you visit someplace in the imperial complex, right? And you’ve been zooming around on that chair that looks like a cart for carrying things around.”

“Th-That vehicle is, well...” Blood rushed to my cheeks. The emperor knew that I’d been rampaging about in the rickshaw.

“Sai, I don’t want you to be a mere court woman. Please take more advantage of your status as the Wagtail Priestess.”

“Take advantage of it?”

“Yes. Right now, you are the person with the most freedom in the imperial court, in a sense. You aren’t a court official, you’re not a wealthy daughter of a noble clan... You are Priestess Sai, and there are things only you can do. And I want you to have the freedom to do them.”

The emperor’s expectations weighed heavy on my shoulders, yet they were a comforting presence. Someone dear to me trusted me and was relying on me—how could I not relish that bliss?

“Thank you. I shall do my best to answer your kindness, Your Majesty.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Pancakes at a Tea Party

MORNINGS for the Wagtail Priestess started early. At an hour on the cusp of being late night, I was riding in an ox-drawn carriage with Suzuiro, some maids, and a few guards. Our destination was the teahouse district that merchants

frequented.

Suzuiro was a purehearted, clever, and cute girl, but that wasn't all: her background was impressive as well.

"A tea party, I see! In that case, leave it to your Suzuiro!"

Suzuiro's family, the Ryuka clan, was one of three households that ruled supreme in the apothecary industry in Orient. Thanks to her and her family's connections, I was able to organize a tea party for women in Orient's merchant class.

In my homeland, Centoria, we mostly traveled by horse coach or donkey, but the recommended means of transportation in the Oriental capital was palanquin or ox buggy. Our vehicle was identical to the ones I'd seen on the bottom platform of displays of *hina* dolls in my previous life, the type of transport favored by Heian nobility. In my opinion, both horses and oxen were adorable.

Although the sun had yet to peek over the horizon, vendors were already hard at work. It was a cool morning, with a refreshing breeze of just the right strength to brush the bamboo blinds but not make a racket. It was the ideal day to be a passenger on an ox carriage.

Finally given the chance to visit the industrial part of the city, I took in the scenery. The streets looked almost as if somebody had cut them out of a historical Chinese court drama. The clothing of the passersby, however, and the food being sold at the market, gave me a more Japanese impression.

"If Japan's missions to Tang China hadn't been discontinued, would this have been their culture instead...?" I muttered.

"Japan? Missions? What's that, Lady Sai?" Suzuiro stared at me with wide, inquisitive eyes.

"Ah, well... I am talking about a faraway land." Feeling a little shy, I began to talk about my memories from my past life. "There is an island country, and they wished to learn the advanced culture of the continent across the sea. Thus, they sent periodical envoys on ships to foster cultural exchange. Japan and China are those two countries respectively, and the missions were named for the

dynasties at the time, to Tang China or to Sui China.”

“Ah, I see! Lady Sai, you seem to know everything! Ah... Ahhh, that’s so interesting!” A lightbulb seemed to light above her head. She gazed at the road through the gaps in the bamboo screen; our carriage was crossing a bridge. Then she said, “Here, in my country, our written language, clothing, and cuisine is said to have been brought over by Amawashi, who came from across the ocean! Um, basically, the emperor’s ancestor!”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes! Our history sounds similar to that story.”

“...Now that you mention it, you are right.”

Past the narrow water canal, I could see porters carrying cargo from ships. The canal led to a large river, and downstream was the ocean. Suzuiro was probably picturing its coast.

Perhaps in the world of the game there was also a nation across the ocean with a society similar to the Orient Empire.



OUR carriage advanced into the teahouse district, ferrying us toward the biggest and most conspicuous tea hall. Its grounds were so extensive that I could almost believe I was at a palace on the imperial grounds.

Once we entered, I gave instructions to Suzuiro and the maids, and we busied ourselves with preparations. Time flew by, and before we knew it, the sun had greeted the world with its kind rays of light, painting the hall with pastel hues through the windows.

It was then that Suzuiro’s mother, the matriarch of the Ryuka family, arrived at the tea hall along with the other ladies of merchant families. In total, around twenty women were joining our tea session that day, and each of them came with her own maids and attendants, so the count added up very quickly.

Suzuiro’s mother was a beautiful woman with black hair. She offered her salutation, saying, “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Sai. I am the female head of the Ryuka clan, Awafuji. I am honored to have the

opportunity to meet you, Wagtail Priestess.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy day to attend my tea party.”

Her lips pulled into a reserved smile. “Thank you for always taking care of Suzuiro.”

There was a transient beauty about her—almost like that of a lone lily blooming silently in the mountains. Though I couldn’t find any similarities between mother and daughter in the shape of their eyes or brows, their silver irises and foreheads were identical.

She was very different from the other women present, who all exuded an aura of ambition and dominance that clearly befit their status as career women. I’d been rather surprised to learn that it was she who represented the Ryuka clan, one of the three most prominent families in the apothecary trade. Yet one summons from her had been enough to gather such a crowd of businesswomen, so she was definitely someone very influential.

The distinguished women of the capital’s merchant clans stood before me, the Wagtail Priestess, dressed in attire that bespoke their station—they were as eye-catching as flowers while retaining the elegance of swans.

“Thank you, all of you, for taking time out of your busy schedules to come here today.”

They greeted me one after another, and I reminded myself to act in the way expected of the Wagtail Priestess. I straightened my spine and maintained my composure. I had come to their land by invitation of the emperor, and I was a direct channel to the emperor himself. The Wagtail Priestess could not make any mistakes.

The venue I had chosen for our tea party was a smaller outbuilding linked by a garden to the main hall of the teahouse. It was a snug little bungalow, and its location made up for what it lacked in space. Light bounced off the verdant young leaves in the garden and the surface of the pond, creating glittering patches of radiance inside the room. On a clear day, it was a very comfortable place for relaxation.

A female attendant began to deliver tea and sweetmeats to our room. The managers of the tea hall had selected the tea, and I had asked them beforehand to prepare blends that would match the taste of each individual. The attendant poured the tea with a grace that was a pleasure to watch, and beside her, Suzuiro served the sweets to everyone.

One lady commented, “Oh my, what a rare tea dessert. It’s a fried cake from Centoria, isn’t it?”

They weren’t the ladies of merchant houses for nothing—they always stayed up to date with the latest information. I nodded. “It is a dessert we call a pancake in Centoria. I hope it will be to your liking.”

The sweets on offer were small minipancakes that could be eaten with toothpicks. There was a kitchen in the smaller building that operated separately from the kitchens in the main teahouse; it was probably reserved for the favorite chefs of guests to cook on the spot. I had borrowed it and baked Centorian pastries since early in the morning to entertain my guests.

The pancakes themselves were lined up on boat-shaped dishes, served with toppings of whipped cream and red bean paste. And of course, I’d prepared each lady’s plate according to her taste, which I’d researched beforehand. Some had coarsely ground red bean paste, while others had smooth.

Baked and fried desserts were very common in Centoria, and even in Orient, I had no difficulty getting my hands on all the ingredients required. The recipe I used, though, and the aesthetic presentation of food, was in the style of pancakes remembered from my previous life. I had some trouble making the whipped cream, since I wasn’t a professional, and a mixer wasn’t readily available either. Instead, I grabbed some metal fittings and alchemized them into something similar to whisks from my past life. Then I infused them with magic, turning them into a hand mixer.

Inspired by those otherworldly techniques, I’d also adjusted the flame height and heat. In my previous life, anybody could easily learn delicious recipes regardless of status—it had been a good era indeed. And because I’d had the kitchen all to myself, I’d cheated my way through the tedious process using magic without worry.

“My, this looks delicious,” a lady gushed. “Is there a recommended way to eat it?”

I replied, “Please treat them as you would a normal accompaniment to your tea. I am sure that we all have different preferences in taste, so I suggest trying one plain before applying the toppings, the whipped cream and red bean. We also have honey and roasted soy flour available if anyone wants some.”

In time with my words, Suzuiro bowed next to the food trolley.

The ladies all appeared excited about the pancakes, and I let out a silent breath of relief.

“Ah, it matches slightly stronger green tea very well,” one said.

“This is the first time I have ever tasted sweets from Centoria, and they are indeed both sweet and delectable.”

Their favorable reception brought joy to my heart. Truthfully, the recipe I’d chosen was a little different from the Centorian version—it was less oily and sugary. The ladies in attendance were all used to the milder taste of Oriental confectionery, so I’d thought it much better to allow them to adjust the sweetness to their own palettes with the various toppings.

“Lady Priestess, did you perhaps once work as a chef?”

I shook my head. “That is not the case.”

“My, you could start a restaurant with such delicious pastries. I love them.”

“Thank you for your high praise.”

Honestly, because I had relied entirely on memories from my previous life to make them, such praise prompted guilt to eat away at me. The food was based on knowledge that wasn’t from their world, after all, so they would naturally find it novel and delicious. The credit didn’t really belong to me.

Though I felt a little like a deer caught in headlights, I managed to pull through the meal without a hitch as I observed the women before me and tracked the flow of the conversation. We moved from topic to topic, never running out of things to discuss, and my guests enjoyed both the unique sweets and the wonderful company.

Even among the merchant women, it seemed, Emperor Haruka was very popular. And at the same time, the emperor's mother, the empress dowager, appeared to be held in high regard as well.

"I have had the honor of meeting the empress dowager a few times. After she left the Inner Palace and returned to her birth family, the Kiriya clan, she did all kinds of philanthropic work to help people suffering from natural disasters. She even spoke to many of us women from trade families, listening patiently to our opinions and troubles."

I mulled over that information. "I see, thank you for telling me."

The intelligence the empress dowager gathered then had likely played a key role in Emperor Haruka's reign after he ascended the throne. I had nothing but respect and admiration for the woman, who had done much to pave the way for her son.

One woman sighed, "The empress dowager was such a beautiful woman. I have never had the fortune of seeing His Majesty's face, but I am sure that they must look alike."

The subject turned to the emperor, and noting that opening, I attempted to steer our dialogue in the direction I wanted it to go. "The emperor also has an ethereal beauty, almost blurring the line between gender. Not just in terms of visage, but, well...his demeanor as well, in my opinion."

"Oh, yes, people discuss it pretty often. You know, about the emperor being a woman."

"Wha..." My heart skipped a beat.

Yet the conversation that followed completely betrayed my expectations.

"I have a daughter as well, and, well, girls all like romance novels with a single woman surrounded by many men, do they not? There are actually books with the theme of cross-dressing where the stories feature the emperor as a woman."

My eyes widened. "R-Really?"

"Right, it is quite a popular genre. For example, those with love triangles

between the female emperor and the Generals of the Twin Wings.”

“Ah, I have seen works in which the emperor is a man and the Twin Wings are women.”

One after another, they enlightened me about the plots and tropes of various books. I hadn’t expected the turn of events at all.

“I do not know what the culture is like in Centoria, but in Orient, we’re pretty lax about arts and literature. As long as they do not cross too many lines, people can write and draw whatever they want. There are many works that use the emperor or the imperial court as a motif.”

“I see...” I mumbled.

That actually made sense. In my past life, a lot of literature evoked real people, such as *The Tale of Genji*. Women didn’t have as many opportunities as men to leave their houses in the world of the game, and hobbies that could be enjoyed indoors were, of course, a big part of their lives. And since the harem constituted an ugly smear on Orient’s history, it was inevitable that romance novelists would turn their sights to the men of the imperial court, opting to sink into the genderbending swamp instead.

“Speaking of which, the literacy rate of women in this country is very high,” I remarked.

“Well, even girls working as assistants or servants need to know how to read and write a little, or else they would be unable to find any employment.”

“If they made a mistake with the choice of medicine during an errand, for example, that would cause much strife, so relying on memory alone is not a part of our work culture.”

“Boys tend to have a more rigorous education, and they have to start by learning classical works. After all, unless they know many tales and stories, they could not make a living as traveling merchants.”

I was a little surprised. “So knowledge of medicine is not the only focus.”

“But of course!” they all said in chorus, looking very proud.

One lady placed her hand against her cheek. “But, well, in truth, we never

hear any gossip about the emperor. That is perhaps why everyone's imagination runs so wild."

Everyone else present nodded, agreeing with her.

"Even the men hear very little about him and say that they barely see him outside official rites and ceremonies."

"The majority of the literature based on the imperial court that we mentioned earlier is based on the period when the Inner Palace was functioning, in fact."

The Inner Palace.

The phrase fell into the conversation like a drop of vibrant dye in water, and the harmonious atmosphere shifted. They had all seemed very friendly without exception before, but their reactions varied enough to suddenly warrant different categories. Some wrinkled their nose in displeasure; others' eyes shone with excitement.

"On that topic, does the emperor have plans for establishing a new harem?" one murmured.

"It caused an awful lot of disorder back then..."

"Surely he is busy with the founding of the Sekirei Palace and the revival of our traditional rites."

"Still..."

Their sentences came slowly like a small trickle of water, and they seemed to be gauging my response. I wasn't the only one there hoping to gain information—they wanted a glimpse into the imperial court's future plans if possible.

I shrugged my shoulders slightly, then raised my voice so it was directed at everyone and not any particular individual. "To my knowledge, there are no plans of reinstating the harem system, at least not presently. The palace that served as the Inner Palace and housed the harem has now been repurposed as Sekirei Palace, which means that... During these next few years, it is very unlikely that the emperor will establish a harem as the previous emperor did."

I chose my words carefully and supplied the information the women sought. Some looked relieved, while some looked dejected. Though all wore smiles on

their faces, more was going on underneath the surface, and I could sense awkwardness in their gestures. *They may all be women in merchant families, but they probably have differing opinions on the harem. It might be a good idea to change the topic at the next opportunity...*

And just as I was considering doing so, Suzuiro poked her head into the room through the beaded bamboo curtain that provided us privacy from the corridor. “Lady Sai, the preparations are complete!”

I gave her a small nod before standing. “Everyone, there is something I would love to show all of you today. If it is all right with you, could you please follow me to the adjacent room?”

Chapter Forty: Chatting about Cosmetics with Businesswomen, or, Market Research and Human Behavior

THE women appeared thankful for the opportunity to leave the awkwardness behind, and they all rose in succession. Talk about the harem probably wasn’t that welcome.

We exited the tea room suffused with the fragrance of sweet pancakes, passed the walkway in the garden, then arrived in a room in which wafted the scent of fresh flowers.

“What a wonderful smell,” one lady sighed. “Oh? This is...” Soon they were all whispering excitedly, cheer tinging their voices.

In the middle of the room stood a table draped with silk, and on it was an assortment of skin care products in glass bottles. Rattan baskets sat next to it, filled with small samples in bags.

Suzuiro greeted everyone with a big smile. “If they are to your liking, please take these back with you as souvenirs. The contents of the glass bottles are trial products for future commercial ventures. Please feel free to test out any of them.” I’d asked her beforehand to prepare them.

A lady perked up. “My, did you make these, Wagtail Priestess?”

I nodded. “Yes. They are cosmetics I made with a combination of techniques from Centoria and my own knowledge. In Centoria, one requires a license to make skin care products, and the art of their creation is privy only to specialists. Therefore, I am considering making a brand of goods based on Sekirei Palace to export to foreign countries, including Centoria.

“I hear that the women of Orient make their own skin care products and that everyone here is both craftswoman and consumer. If possible, I would like everyone’s honest feedback.”

My request implied that I regarded their skill highly. I had solicited their opinions, and anyone would be preening themselves after that. They immediately took the cosmetics into their hands and began to test the feel and check what ingredients were used.

“For the toners, there are watery ones and ones more like lotion,” a woman remarked.

“Yes,” I replied. “For summerlike seasons when we sweat under the sweltering sun, I have made a waterier one that feels refreshing on the skin. For winter, when it’s easier to get dry skin, I made the toner more viscous and added ingredients that would allow for lasting moisture.”

“What are the key ingredients?”

“For the oil components... In this one over here, I used horse oil from Meridiona and beeswax. For this one, I used rapeseed oil and beeswax. In some, I mixed in a very small amount of olive oil.”

“The ones with olive oil feel really smooth on the skin. Wonderful. The scent doesn’t seem like it would clash with that of other cosmetics, either. But... would you make any profit off this?”

“I have kept the imported ingredients to a minimum. Even when I did, I chose materials from Meridiona, which are relatively cheaper compared to other countries’, so in terms of profit ratio...” I paused, turning to Suzuiro. “Miss Suzuiro, please show them the drafts of our wholesale and retail pricing.”

“Yes, my lady!”

With stilted movements, Suzuiro handed out the documents. The lady merchants perused the ingredient list and the prices with intense looks on their faces, calculating in their mind whether the enterprise was plausible. Although the conversation about the harem had temporarily darkened the atmosphere, around the table of cosmetics, everyone was united once again—as the female heads of business-oriented families.

“Hmm, I’m not sure about this one...”

“It would be nice if you had a soap of the same scent.”

“If we want traveling merchants to sell this, we might want to decrease its weight...”

They were different from the noblewomen of Centoria. While the noblewomen possessed a keen eye for the quality of products, very few spared a thought for the business side of things, such as the manufacturing process, selling price, and profit ratio.

One lady turned to me. “By the way, is it possible to make odorless versions of these?”

I nodded. “Yes, there are unscented ones as well. If anyone dislikes the scent, please take those instead.”

“Thank you, Lady Priestess. Does everyone in Centoria use ingredients like these?”

“Yes. The list is over here,” I responded.

“Oh, that is an interesting combination... In my household—”

“Hmm, well, in the case of Oriental women, we tend to like—”

As they studied the ingredient list, they started to tell me about the components and recipes of their own homemade cosmetics.

I listened to them earnestly. “Thank you very much. This has been a wonderful learning opportunity for me, both as a manufacturer and a woman.”

“Do *you* have any personal preferences in cosmetics, Lady Priestess?”

“Well...” I hesitated. “Though it is a little embarrassing to admit this, I did not

own cosmetics in Centoria. I was busy with work every day. My maids are instructing me nowadays. Miss Suzuiro has taught me a lot as well.”

“Ohhh? Li’l Suzuiro, hm?”

Suzuiro let out a squeak at the sudden mention of her name, and she seemed to jump.

With a smile more akin to a grimace—*I’m not good at smiling*—I jotted down their comments. Throughout the session, I also surreptitiously observed each lady who spoke with me. From their appearance, state of their skin, and their health, I pieced together pictures of their daily lives, filling the gaps with my imagination.

A human’s values and opinions are formed according to their experiences and lifestyle. Words, in the end, were deliberately crafted constructions that only expressed what the speaker wanted someone to know. Through the hints that seeped through, however, you could get a sense of what really was lurking underneath that mask—their character and life history. And after taking those into account, you could utilize that information to develop the most suitable products for your market.

For example, a person who liked cosmetics that felt light on their skin might actually be choosing a product inappropriate for their body’s needs. That person’s foundational beliefs led them to the conclusion that lightweight cosmetics were better.

This person probably likes lightweight toners because the serum she usually uses is made with loofah extract. There isn’t enough water retention happening, and by noon, her skin is oily—which is why she wants more watery cosmetics to flush her oil away.

But directly recommending that she use another product wouldn’t be wise. Okay. I’ll give her something lightweight but pair it with a sample optimal for her skin. Once she tries them both, she’ll realize the difference herself and learn which one’s more suitable for her.

I made profiles in my mind for each merchant woman, listing their skin type, lifestyle, and preferences. I hadn’t gleaned just their taste in cosmetics—how they lived and managed their money, as well as their sense of values, had also

become apparent to me for the most part.

“By the way, does anyone have any recommendations regarding the ingredients I used or other ingredients I should add?” I asked.

Their eyes gleamed as if they had been waiting for that question, and they all began to rattle off suggestion after suggestion.

“Well, personally, I think that you should also have more fragrant items like perfume. Flowery scents, for example.”

“If you are planning on letting traveling merchants carry your goods, it would be better if you avoid making products too bulky and focus on the total number sold instead. For example, if you decreased the volume in a bottle and increased the total number of bottles, you would reach a wider client base.”

“Horse oil is, well... No matter how wonderful it is, in Orient, it’s a little... It might not sell well.”

“In terms of olive oil, you can get it cheaper from Occidenia than Meridiona. I think it’d feel a little different, so how about I order some for Sekirei Palace as a trial?”

I listened carefully before thanking them all. They’d given me advice and reviewed my trial products without reservation. Their high standards and strict demands reflected their lofty expectations for my merchandise. They treated me with respect as the Wagtail Priestess, yet that hadn’t stopped them from critiquing my ideas as professional merchants. It had been really helpful, and I couldn’t thank them enough.

After we saw them off, Suzuiro grinned. She looked a little tired. “It was a big success, Lady Sai!”

I nodded. “Let’s not rest on our laurels. We shall start making improved versions of the products tonight.”



BY the time we’d bid a formal farewell to all of the women, it was already past noon. I thanked the staff at the tea hall where we’d rented the rooms, and then Suzuiro and I returned to the imperial palace in an ox carriage.

“You could have gone home with your mother for the time being, but...” I sighed. “You stayed and helped until the end.”

“It’s my job! Of course I would!”

“Thank you.”

Suzuiro glanced over at my hands. “By the way, what is that package?”

“Oh, this? These are pancakes for you. I figured you probably didn’t get a chance to eat one.”

After a loud gasp, Suzuiro stared at me with shining eyes.

“You helped me with various preparations, and you must have been very busy.” I continued. “Without you, I wouldn’t have had such success today. This isn’t much, but please have it after you get back.”

She let out a half cheer, half sob. “Thank you so much—I’m so happy!”

I handed over the package, then released a long sigh. The guards were sneaking looks in our direction, probably lured by the fragrant sweets, and I smiled. “I have prepared a portion for everyone else as well. Once we return to the imperial palace, I shall hand them out, and...” I paused. “Actually, would it be possible to make a detour?”

“Where to, my lady?” a guard asked.

Suzuiro peered at the map that I’d unfolded in my hands. “This is...”

“These are the accommodations of the women who resigned from the harem... I sorted through them and listed the ones I wish to meet in person.”

My words were vague, yet someone in the know might’ve already deduced to whom I was referring—the origins of the remnants other than Azusairo.

Chapter Forty-One: The Wagtail Priestess Is Hard at Work Running Around to Recruit Court Ladies

MY plan was to visit the homes of the several former consorts I had set my

sights on, and I did exactly that.

First on the list was Mistress Hanadairo, who hailed from a merchant family that ran a foreign trade company. They imported furniture manufactured in Centoria. During the era of the harem, the exotic furniture of Centoria had been regarded with the highest esteem, and its popularity had trickled down from the Inner Palace to the citizens. Thanks to that, her family's business had boomed. But the moment the Inner Palace was abolished, the trend ended too, and her family immediately tumbled into bankruptcy.

In the present, her household was a mere shadow of its former glory. They didn't own the residence they dwelled in, her father had destroyed his health through binge drinking, and her mother was bedridden from overwork. Mistress Hanadairo spent her days nursing them. Her living remnant in Sekirei Palace had been just as embodied as Mistress Azusairo's.

I chose to be frank with her, telling her upfront about her remnant.

"A living remnant... Well, indeed. I would not be surprised if I'd spawned one."

Age-wise, she was supposed to be in her forties. Yet most of her hair was gray, and she looked as drained as an elderly woman.

"Those were the most joyous days of my life," she continued. "Though I was but a commoner girl, I stepped forward into the imperial court... I can remember it just like yesterday. Back then, my father was energetic and cheerful, and he prepared a lot of furniture to accompany me in my marriage. The other consorts took a liking to the pieces, and they all competed for the chance to place an order through me... I remember that day too. I was at the highest point of my life then, and... Those were wonderful days."

Her fingertips were wrinkled and raw, discolored from her many years of caring for her parents. A sour, moldy stench filled her abode as well, and the contrast to the glorious period she described was like heaven and hell. Though perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised, because her house was in the slums, and the air in the district as a whole was tainted in some way.

In terms of Onmyodo, the philosophy of yin and yang, this isn't the unluckiest quarter of the capital. But the atmosphere here unbalances and contaminates

the entire city... I should ask the clergy to purify this area some time. And I'll need to ask someone to deploy officials who can arrange social welfare for this area... I must ask around and find out which department I should report this to. If I use the money we received from Centoria when they shipped me off as funding, we should be able to do the bare minimum, at least.

I took Mistress Hanadairo's hands in mine. I channeled my mana into them, increasing their recovery rate, and her hands became soft and supple—hands that fit her actual age.

“Lady Priestess...”

“You will be able to summon doctors to examine your parents soon. This will be part of the employee benefits for court ladies at Sekirei Palace.”

“Employee...benefits...? Um, my apologies, but... Court ladies at Sekirei Palace...? What might that be?”

“I shall be direct. Mistress Hanadairo, are you interested in working at Sekirei Palace? We need you.”

“That's... I... Someone like me... My family ended up like this, and I can't do anything...” She lowered her gaze, hesitation and doubt in her every gesture.

But I wasn't about to give up. “That is not true at all. Please allow me to apologize in advance. At the imperial court, I investigated what you did when you were a consort. There were many records about your family's company, but only the sparsest information was available about you as an individual.”

“...That is because the only thing significant about me was my family trade. I was not skilled, and even when I was young, beautiful was not a word you would use to describe me. The only thing I could do was some calculations and accounting for business, nothing more...”

“There was no record of you, and that is glaring evidence that you lived responsibly without making waves during your time there. And if we consider when your family's business flourished... I concluded that you were the secret, unnoticed central figure behind the curtain—the one who boosted your family's business to its heights.”

Her eyes widened.

I squeezed her hand. “When a woman isn’t the owner of a company or part of its management, people often leave them out of the records. How did they conduct themselves for business gain? How did they play a key part? None of that is recorded. But even if we have no writing on paper to go off of, if we are able to see the big picture, it is as plain as day that you were a very capable person, Mistress Hanadairo, and...one of character. And though I appeared here without an appointment, you applied makeup, groomed your hair, cleaned your house, and even prepared tea, following the etiquette you learned when you were a consort.”

Tears were streaming down Mistress Hanadairo’s cheeks. Almost as if a dam of emotions suppressed over many years was releasing bit by bit, tear after tear slid down her face and splashed on the ground like rain in a parched desert. Gripping my hand, she asked, “Lady Priestess... Why... Why do you think... Why would you go this far for me...?”

“In the end, I am but a mere priestess. I am not bright in the matters of business, you see. Not to mention that I am a fumbling toddler in Orient. I am just an ignorant, silly girl who doesn’t even know anything about this country’s past. So please, Mistress Hanadairo. I need your help.”



I informed Mistress Hanadairo that an ox carriage would come to pick her up the following day. Then I headed to the residence of the second person on my list.

The second was a noblewoman and the daughter of a military officer. She had remarried into an aristocratic household of equal standing as her birth family and was the mother of three children. I had already brought up the offer to the head of her family, her husband, who served in the imperial court, and he had passed the message along to his wife. Therefore, the process was rather smooth. I was able to meet her and her children without hassle.

At age forty-five, she was of a much larger stature—perhaps I’d even call her burly—than noted in her records. When Lady Tetsuiro saw me, she actually didn’t give me time to speak, seizing the opportunity to cut to the chase first.

“Lady Priestess! If it is all right with you, please allow me to work as an

attendant or a maid or a lady-in-waiting—I'd take anything!" she rambled in one breath.

"W-Wow... You were very speedy with your decision..."

"A lot of women are going to join the imperial court soon, right?! In that case, there will likely be many instances where men are, pardon me, *useless*! With you, Lady Priestess, we shall preserve the law and order of Sekirei Palace!"

I let out a dry laugh. "Ha... Haha..."

Lady Tetsuiro made frequent appearances in the chronicles of the Inner Palace. Although a consort, she was still the daughter of a military family, and she'd volunteered to handle many of the matters that had required physical strength in the palace. She'd acted more as a bodyguard for the fellow women, mediated disputes, and terminated fights. At first, she was repeatedly punished by a court official of the Inner Palace—*who probably performed the duty of a eunuch*—but the previous emperor, amused by her actions, granted her forgiveness and even gave her the unique role of Consort Guard.

On that matter, the Inner Palace court official, whose name had been blotted out with ink for some reason, had entreated the previous emperor many times, insisting that establishing new, special posts should be done with caution. He'd cited many failed examples in history, yet the previous emperor had let the advice go in one ear and out the other.

And seeing her in person, well... She does look like a very strong lady. Her build was bigger than even those of her three adult sons. She was almost like a female *yokozuna*, the highest rank of sumo wrestler. Though her sons were all military officers, they were willowy, beautiful men with a refined grace about them, and my guess was that they took after their father.

"Lady Tetsuiro, to tell you the truth, I am here today because I want you to become a court lady of Sekirei Palace. I heard that you indiscriminately protected the consorts of the harem and that on the day the harem was abolished, you went around to bid farewell to all the male court officials who had helped you in some way, did you not? You must have left a wonderful impression—there are many court officials who wish to see you again."

She guffawed. "Oh, I'm so happy to hear that! That makes my time in the

Inner Palace worth it!” she said, grinning earnestly. She was an honest woman, in no way two-faced, and talking with her was very pleasant. “That reminds me, is that one guy still in the imperial court?”

I blinked. “By ‘that one guy,’ you mean...? Unfortunately, my pool of acquaintances is still rather small, so I might not know him.”

“Oh, it’s You-Know-Who. The eccentric court official with long, golden brown hair the color of a fox or a sunset. He wears glasses, too.”

I tilted my head in question. *Have I ever come across a person with such a striking appearance?* I combed through my memories and frowned.

Then, for some reason, one of her sons paled and poked Lady Tetsuiro. “Hey, Mom, you dummy! We mustn’t talk about that person anymore, remember?”

Lady Tetsuiro looked surprised. “Huh? Really?”

Thus my visit to Lady Tetsuiro’s residence ended on a strange note. As for the lady herself, I planned to dispatch an ox carriage to fetch her a week later.

Swaying along with the rock of the carriage, I sank into thoughts about that Inner Palace official whose identity had been redacted in the records. *A court official with hair the golden brown of a fox... Is it possibly...?* Some time ago, the maids of Sekirei Palace had mentioned a “Wicked Fox of Septentrion”—another fox. *Is this Wicked Fox that Inner Palace court official...? And is everyone’s resentment toward the previous emperor now completely aimed at him... perhaps?*

When I snapped out of my reverie, I realized that our ox carriage was turning onto a road that led to the manses of the nobility. *Oh well, thinking about it now is going to get me nowhere. I’ll make a mental note just in case though.*

I internally switched gears and braced myself for my meeting with the next woman.



SUZUIRO and I trundled toward the last residence on my list for the day. Seated opposite me in the carriage, Suzuiro was speaking giddily. “Lady Sai, we’re making great progress!”

“Well, I did some preparation in advance, so it’s probably not that much of a surprise. And next is...”

“Next is...Mistress Tsurubamiiro around the corner...”

The carriage jolted abruptly, interrupting our conversation.

“Sir Guard, please take care of Miss Suzuiro!” I instructed before leaning my body out of the carriage.

A woman had rushed out onto the street, and she was littered with injuries. Blood trickled down her face; she seemed to have made a frantic escape from the claws of violence.

My eyes widened. “Mistress Tsurubamiiro?!”

It was the woman I had been looking for. Her eyes grew as wide as saucers at the sudden call of her name from the carriage. A loud noise emanated from a nearby mansion.

I leaped out of the carriage, tracing both of my arms from shoulder to hand, pouring mana into my muscles. With my magic-enhanced arms, I dragged her to her feet before lifting her up, one hand behind her back and the other beneath her knees.

She sucked in a sharp breath and froze, probably from the shock of being carried by a girl smaller than her.

With her in my arms, I dashed back into the carriage and lowered her onto the seat. Suzuiro let out a little yelp.

Raising my voice, I commanded, “Please start driving! Hurry!” My shout was like a slap to the oxen’s rumps—the carriage made a turbulent pivot, and we tore back the way we had come.

I took out my handkerchief to gently wipe the woman’s bleeding wounds and gazed into her dazed, confused eyes. “I am the Wagtail Priestess Sai. In short, I have come to fetch you, Mistress Tsurubamiiro, because I want you to work at my establishment. We can go through the details later at Sekirei Palace, once you’ve calmed down.”

And accompanied by Mistress Tsurubamiiro, we returned directly to the

imperial complex. When we arrived back to Sekirei Palace, I asked a few maids to take care of her before retiring to my private chambers to write a report about my activities that day.

But before I could do that, I noticed a letter on my desk. “This is...a poem?”

It’d been painted in beautiful, flowing calligraphy and was a direct invitation from the emperor, summoning me to join him as his nightly companion.

Chapter Forty-Two: The Golden Eagle Emperor Makes a Request of the Fox

HARUKA’S time with his “nightly companion,” Sai, ended promptly that evening. Exhausted, he called Yukinari to an upper room of Kita Palace. While he waited, Haruka constructed a magpie with his magic and sent it flying into the night sky. The birds served as his messengers.



THAT night, like every night, the light of the undying lanterns fueled by Haruka’s mana fractured the darkness of the imperial grounds like a sea of stars. Alas, on a night of the new moon, the shadows had the advantage in that perpetual tug-of-war, and the dark prevailed. The cool breeze of night brushed through the multistoried Kita Palace, and Haruka let out a long, long sigh.

“Your Majesty.” Yukinari’s voice held a hint of exasperation.

“Haaah...”

“...Your Majesty.”

“...Haaah...”

“Haruiro.”

“...I’m Haruka, you know.”

“The regal Emperor Haruka would never play with a subject’s hair while sighing every night. That is disrespectful, Haruiro.”

“Haruiro, Haruiro,” Haruka parroted. “You keep calling me by that name. Why’s that, huh? Do you want me to turn into a woman or something? You perv. You adulterer. I’ll expose you to your wife.”

Yukinari went quiet. Haruka fell silent too. One could almost hear the crickets chirping.

Then Yukinari muttered, “My deepest apologies for my impertinence, Your Majesty, but please refrain from making such lurid statements.”

“I definitely won’t...” Haruka shivered. “I got goosebumps saying that.”

To the public, Yukinari and Haruiro were brother and sister, but they had to be very, very careful that people didn’t mistake them for a couple. That would be a nightmare. Among the imperial nobility, while the practice might be scarce, it wasn’t completely impossible for adopted siblings to marry, for example.

Haruka had summoned Yukinari to Kita Palace, where the emperor’s bedchambers were located, and he was in the process of playing with Yukinari’s long hair in between sighs. His hands slowly twisted the general’s tresses into an admirable braid that belonged on a young noble girl, yet not once did Yukinari complain, giving Haruka silent permission.

When he was a child, Haruka had often worn the guise of a girl, and he’d dabbled in some of the hobbies and disciplines of women. Most of it had bored him, and he hadn’t bothered to retain much of what he learned. But, well, meddling with his “brother’s” hair to his heart’s content and putting it in the style of a young lady’s had been a favorite pastime of his—and still was. Every so often, he used Yukinari’s head as a toy to kill time.

After a pause, Haruka mumbled, “I messed up...”

“If the empire collapses, or if I’m killed during a rebellion, people must not find out that I died.”

Sai’s eyes had widened when those words slipped from his mouth, and the sight was burned into his mind. It had felt almost as though he’d reached out to caress a blooming camellia and then watched the flower crumble into dust upon contact with his fingertips—heartbreaking. The girl always surrounded herself with the impenetrable fortress known as the “Wagtail Priestess,” but in

that moment, he seemed to have touched the vulnerable, soft heart she hid within.

Throughout her entire life, she had been the target of unjust torment. She'd lost her parents to war, she'd attended her grandmother on the woman's deathbed, and even what little she had left in her homeland had been reduced to ashes by guardians of "justice." That young girl had grown up, and in the process, her expression had frozen in a stiff and distant mask, almost like that of a warrior rushing toward death in despair. She must've suffered such anguish, much of which Haruka didn't even know about.

He looked torn as he murmured, "I didn't expect to see so much pain on her face when I said that."

"Though she may be a resilient girl, she was imprisoned for nearly half a year and was even nearly executed... To fear the shadow of death would be a reasonable reaction."

"You're right."

"It seems that you lacked thoughtfulness about a critical topic."

As if admitting defeat, Haruka eventually grumbled, "You're exactly right, o great General of the Left Wing."

During their session that night, Sai had touched Haruka with the same nonchalance as always, yet Haruka could have sworn that she seemed to be much more painstaking than usual during his treatment.

"I invited her to this country because I wanted to make her happy. What am I even doing?" he muttered. With yet another sigh, he finished weaving the black hair before him into a gorgeous braid.

And it was at that precise instant that a single magpie sailed across the sky—despite the late hour—flapping right into the elevated room with a rustle of its wings.

Haruka glanced at the bird. "Raiya."

With a poof, the magpie transformed into a boy around the age of thirteen or fourteen as he alighted on the floor. He stared at the pair before saying, "What

in the world are you two *doing*?”

Yukinari protested his innocence. “His Majesty took me prisoner, Master Raiya.”

The boy with hair the color of fox fur shrugged his shoulders and threw the two an incredulous look. “Well, don’t just let him.” Plopping down on the ground, he grabbed the available liquor in a manner incongruous with his apparent age and poured it into a stray sake cup. Without asking permission, he downed it all in one gulp before glowering at them with his large, youthful eyes.

“Your Majesty,” the boy began in a soft soprano yet to experience breakage, “you summoned me on the night of the new moon of all times, so I assume you have serious business with me.”

“Mm-hmm. You’d stand out during the day.”

At the boy’s urging to move on to matters of import, Haruka indicated the envelope on the table with a motion of his eyes. Raiya pulled over a lamp, then opened the missive and skimmed its contents. His brows knit together.

Two of the three there, Yukinari and Raiya, were of a relationship and difference in status that made the idea of them sitting down together to converse absurd, at least to the eyes of an outsider. Especially in the case of Raiya, whose presence in the imperial palace was known only to Haruka and Yukinari. But the fact was, on every single new moon, they could scavenge some time to talk like in the old days.

“Who performed this investigation?” the boy asked in a stern tone.

“A cute wagtail born in Centoria,” Haruka said with relish.

Upon hearing those words, Master Raiya, whose only youthful aspect was his appearance, looked as if he’d swallowed a lemon. “Unbelievable. She is just a young girl, isn’t she?”

“Heh heh heh.” Haruka sounded proud.

What Haruka had folded into that envelope was a document Sai had given him earlier that night—a status report on the former harem consorts. She’d done a thorough investigation of all the consorts, which summed to around

forty women. The dossier contained information about their current lives, and she had ranked the candidates she was considering rehiring at Sekirei Palace in order of urgency. But the concerns of the consorts weren't the only subject of the report—Sai had even included points of improvement in the city facilities' mana usage, proposals for social welfare, and so on.

She also noted that she was researching historic recruitment of court ladies. Though the women were to be staff of Sekirei Palace, and she therefore had the final say in their employment, she seemed to fear that if she didn't follow precedent, people would start to criticize Sekirei Palace as a result of the harem's infamy. She was but a young girl, and it was hard to believe that she'd compiled all that data.

Haruka felt a sense of satisfaction at Raiya's shock.

Raiya stared at Haruka with a severe expression. The boy almost appeared to be glaring right through the veil—the gaze of a mage who didn't have to fear Haruka's magic burning his eyes. "Stop laughing. Answer me."

"Well, it's a simple story. Sai Cutrettola is just that kind of girl. When she worked at the Order's Department of Medicine, every day, she'd deal with a mountain load of clinical records and keep track of the fastidious demands of moody nobles. And she chose to tackle those tasks all by herself... Furthermore, she worked as both a maid and a scribe, which means that she had the opportunity to collect information about different classes of society as well as its web of personal relationships. And with that experience, she can see the big picture and react to any situation swiftly—that's the type of person she is."

Raiya was speechless.

"But there's more," Haruka added. "After her betrothal, she left Sekirei Prefecture, her domain, in the hands of regional governors yet was able to provide a channel for their voices to reach the central government. She addressed their unwritten, hidden pleas, reading between the lines of their letters."

"Is she really only seventeen? Is she a witch or something?"

"Well, her extraordinary capabilities are exactly why she was exiled and her house torched." Haruka looked at the boy with the fox-like hair and inclined his

head slightly. “Wasn’t there someone like that in this empire too? Way, way back... If I remember correctly, he was—”

“The Wicked Fox of Septentrion, right? Huh, I wonder who he is. I have no idea, at least.”

“Yeah. Neither do I,” said Haruka meaningfully.

The boy rolled up the document and slid it into his baggy sleeve, his clothing sized for an adult. He quaffed another cup of liquor before getting to his feet. “I see her request about a misogiharae of the city. Survey of the land will take around ten days. I’ll send you the report by magpie, so when you find an opportunity, ask the clergy to attend to it. As for the precedence of women in court and what their duties entailed, there are a few instances in the Myth of Beginning that ring some bells, so that’ll probably take me around three days.”

“Thank you.” Haruka smiled at the elder in a boy’s body. “When conventional means will not suffice, your help is always invaluable, Master Raiya.”

“You’re much more underhanded than the previous emperor, Your Majesty.”

“Don’t call it underhanded.” The emperor pouted. “Unlike some people, I want to properly protect the things dear to me.”

“Yes, yes, whatever you say.” Raiya boosted himself onto the railing, then turned back toward Haruka as if an idea had occurred to him. “Your Majesty... I have a request regarding this young wagtail of Centoria. Could I borrow her for a bit?”

“Of course. It’ll have to wait until the festival’s over though.”

“My advice is that you warn her now, before it’s too late.” Leaving those words in his wake, Raiya leaped off the railing and shot into the night sky like a rabbit bouncing toward the moon. Midair, he transformed into a magpie and soared away from Kita Palace.

Haruka trained his eye on the bird as it grew smaller and smaller in the distance before almost unconsciously whispering, “I don’t want Sai to become a ‘witch,’ so...my teacher, I’m counting on you.”

Chapter Forty-Three: The Day before the Houshoku Festival

THE Houshoku Festival was the following day, so I was on my way to a costume fitting as well as some final checks with the clergy.

They had constructed a new shrine for the festival out of local cypress, and it was furnished with gorgeous bamboo blinds that were just as new. Whenever a breeze meandered by, the blinds fluttered and danced in the wind, creating a marvelous scene.

For the fitting, I was led to the area that served as the shrine's waiting room. I stood before a mirror while a maid scrutinized every detail of my outfit and asked me how it felt on my body.

"Thank you very much. It fits me perfectly," I responded.

The maid smiled in a mix of elation and relief. "I heard that this style of attire was used over two hundred years ago, when Sekirei Prefecture was still Orient's territory. This is also the first time I've seen it in person, and I must say, it's very functional and seems to allow for a lot of mobility."

I nodded. "Indeed. The hem of the dress doesn't drag across the ground either... Perhaps I should consider clothes of the same design for my daily wear."

The ancient, traditional priestess garb of Orient was similar to the Shintoist *miko* clothing I'd been familiar with in my previous life. The ensemble consisted of a white top and black *hakama*. Intricate whorls of golden thread shimmered under the light, the embroidery a sight to behold. A translucent shawl of thin silk much like the *pibo* of hanfu would apparently be draped over my shoulder, and as I put it on, I voiced a question on my mind. "Is this dyed pattern depicting the wings of a wagtail?"

"Yes. The clergy and the close advisors of the emperor, as well as all the members of Sekirei Palace—that's you, Lady Sai, your attendants, and the maids—must all sport a wing motif somewhere on their clothing. And please

take a look at the shawl. If you drape it over your arm, here, look... It's almost as if wings are growing from your back and folding around you," the maid explained, a smile on her face as she indicated my reflection in the mirror.

She was right—the black wings dyed on the fabric did seem to wrap around me.

"In this country," she added, "wings are sacred symbols. It's perfect for you, Wagtail Priestess."

Then a maid called out to us from outside. The one attending me ran out to inquire what the matter was before returning and passing the news on: "His Majesty is here."

The emperor entered, alone. The maid left to give us privacy, and when only the two of us remained in the room, the emperor lifted the veil of his crown and tucked it behind his ears. He smiled at me, his face unobscured. "You look good in that," he said. His eyes narrowed slightly with his gentle grin.

The beautiful man was wearing garments of white silk as he always did. The dark, glossy brown of his golden eagle wings made a striking contrast to the pastels of his hair, skin, and clothes.

"Are you not going around as a woman today?" I asked.

"Welp, if possible, I prefer to be in my true form, you know what I mean?"

The emperor came up beside me, and his eyes found mine in our reflection. He was tall—perhaps around two heads taller than me—and when I stood next to the giant, my inky hair and clothing of white and black was very conspicuous. His ivory hair, white silk robes, and snow-white skin looked ethereal under the light, his features almost like that of a fairy in a picture book.

I didn't really have an opinion about my looks; I neither liked nor disliked them. In my eyes, I was average in that department. Beside the emperor, however, I felt akin to a prop that emphasized his splendor—and I was glad about that.

In the mirror, the emperor inclined his head slightly in question. "Or, well... Do you feel more at ease when I'm a woman, Sai?"

“No, that is not the case at all. The opposite, in fact. Even when you change your gender, your mana circuits are those of a man, so I feel more comfortable when you are in this form.”

“A very mage-esque answer indeed.”

I hesitated. “By the way, Your Majesty. These clothes...” I gestured to the miko clothing I was wearing. “Including the costs to procure these... You must have used a tremendous amount of the budget on Sekirei Palace.”

I was concerned about the court’s finances. They’d only just finished repaying all the debts incurred during the era of the previous emperor, and the current emperor was suddenly lavishing money on an intruder, the Wagtail Priestess. If that knowledge spread among the citizens, it would affect the emperor’s authority.

“It’s all right,” the emperor reassured me. “The silk we used for your priestess clothing is from Kanpou Prefecture.”

That name rang a bell in my mind.

He continued, “Kanpou Prefecture has always suffered from frequent natural disasters, and it was hit by a particularly devastating one during the reign of the previous emperor. But now the flood control systems are in place, and their textile industry is stable, so all the fabric used during the festival originates from that prefecture.”

And then it hit me. On my journey from Centoria to Orient, the maids had mentioned that region. I gazed down at my apparel. Beautiful, delicate patterns were woven into the silk, the workmanship so intricate that it was almost like a devout offering to a deity.

“Sai, the simple act of putting on these clothes as the Wagtail Priestess means a lot to the citizens of Kanpou Prefecture,” the emperor pointed out. “This is not money wasted, and nobody can argue otherwise. So you can relax and wear it proudly.”

“Yes, Your Majesty...”

“By the way, all of your ladies-in-waiting are going to wear a uniform, right?”

“They are. If they wear the same outfit, it will become a symbol. They’ll be differentiated from normal women as court ladies, and that will help them fit in better in the imperial court. At least, that is my intention.”

I glanced at the uniform in the corner of the room. My attendants dressed in the same attire I did, the only difference that their lively color scheme was based around the pink of cherry blossoms.

“At the moment, all the bureaucrats working in the imperial court are men. They all wear an official uniform, and one can easily deduce their position through its hue. And...if in the future, more women work in the imperial court in general, expanding out from Sekirei Palace, a uniform that establishes someone’s identity as a court lady would make it easier to distinguish her from her bureaucratic counterparts...”

“I think that’s a brilliant idea. And that’d help people of different social standings too—they’d be able to work without care for their background.” He paused. “Why did you choose that color?”

“Well, Sekirei Palace was established by you, Emperor Haruka, and your name means the ‘fruit of spring.’ I thought it would be nice if we always had the color of spring around, no matter the season.”

After a beat of silence, the emperor said, “That’s wonderful.” With a small smile, he approached the garment on display and slid his fingers across the fabric. The careful stroke of his white fingertips was like the touch of a feather on needles.

“I was born during the first week of the year, and in Orient, we call that period *shinshun*, ‘new spring,’” he murmured, his voice low as if he were speaking to himself. “During the reign of the previous emperor, the country was frozen in a bitter winter, and the name given to me was also a duty—I must bring spring to this empire. And I must become an emperor befitting of that name.”

“For your sake, I shall also do everything I can, Your Majesty,” I promised.

The emperor grinned like a mischievous child. “Thanks. Let’s both do our best.”

Chapter Forty-Four: The Day of the Houshoku Festival

AND finally, it was the big day—that of the Houshoku Festival. It was a clear, sunny day without wind, not a cloud in the arresting azure sky of early summer. In the end, the emperor hadn't informed me when he'd show up as Lady Haruiro, and the day had already arrived. *How is this going to turn out...?*

The festival would be held in a plaza on the imperial grounds. The plaza itself was segmented by colorful stone paving in the shape of squares, and to the north stood a magnificent altar as well as a shrine dedicated to the emperor. The latter structure was similar to the main hall of a Japanese Shinto shrine, the *honden*, the most sacrosanct building on such premises.

Inside the hall, behind the sacred bamboo blinds, I could make out the vague silhouette of the emperor. His unfurled wings extended outside the partition, and the hem of his long kimono trailed on the floor conspicuously, spilling past the blinds like moonlight. *Is that the emperor? Or...his substitute?*

A crowd was gathered in the plaza in front of the shrine, and the assembled attendees consisted of the feudal lords and nobility of each prefecture, influential merchants, and imperial priests. All those present were clearly personages with outstanding power in their own right, and to witness them collected in one place was awe-inspiring.

The noble clans were separated from one another and the other classes by curtains. Then there were the seats for important commoners and rich merchant families; they had no curtains. Finally, a faraway fence cordoned off the space, guards lining the boundary. Beyond were people, people, people—commoners of normal status. And at the center of the plaza were a dozen or so weaving looms in a neat row, each one decorated by fresh flowers of every hue.

I was peering out at the plaza from the waiting room when a large shadow slipped into view beside me.

"Lord Yukinari," I addressed him.

"There are more participants than in other years." Lord Yukinari, who usually let his long raven hair flow free, had tied up his tresses with an elegant golden

accessory. The armor and helmet he wore over his navy clothes were of a Japanese style and much more glamorous than his usual equipment. “They probably came to catch a glimpse of you, Wagtail Priestess, however brief it may be.”

“I-I see...”

“Are you nervous?”

“I always worked behind the scenes or as support staff, and... I did not have many chances to stand in front of a crowd...”

“Do not fear. The clergy will recite the ritual prayers, and experienced priestesses will perform the divine weaving rites. As long as you retain your composure, Lady Sai, you will be fine.”

“I will... Thank you very much.”

In a corner secluded by curtains, priestesses in miko clothing were standing by, their hakama the color of cherry blossoms. They were single women in their teens, and they appeared calm, likely due to said experience. A woman in hakama of dark scarlet was giving them instructions.

“If you are looking for a woman with profound knowledge of the events of the imperial court, that woman over there is a good choice. You may ask her if you ever have any questions.”

“By over there, do you mean—” I paused “—that lady with the crimson hakama?”

“She is my wife.”

“Wha—” I was so shocked that my voice emerged as a squeak.

Then, from the other side of the waiting room, Suzuiro rushed over, her pink hakama fluttering in the air.

“L-Lady Saaai. Preparations are done over here!” she reported in a hushed but energetic voice. She jumped a little when she noticed Lord Yukinari, before straightening her spine and greeting him. “General of the Left Wing! I shall be in your care today.”

“Indeed.”

Suzuiro's nervousness was apparent. I'd been sinking in a whirlpool of anxiety, astonishment, and a mix of other emotions, but upon seeing Suzuiro, I felt it all disappear with a sigh of relief.

"Here, Suzuiro." I reached out to adjust her ornate hairpin. "Your hairpin fell out a little when you sprinted over here."

"Th-Thank you very much, my lady!"

"How about we fix that up and return to our spots in the waiting room?"

"Yes, my lady!"

I turned and bowed to Lord Yukinari. "We shall take our leave, then."

"It seems that you regain your presence of mind when you look after others, Lady Sai." A small, gentle curl graced the corners of his lips—a rare sight indeed.

Somewhat sheepish, I felt my cheeks heat up. With Suzuiro following behind, I returned to our designated positions for the Houshoku Festival, which was about to begin at any moment.



IT turned out that Lord Yukinari had been right—Suzuiro and I spent most of the festival standing around.

Clergy processed from the plaza to the shrine where the emperor awaited, chanting prayers all the while. The priestesses made offerings of food and liquor as well as sacred *sakaki* leaves. In return, they accepted threads of silk and started the rites at the looms. Although each part of the ceremony was a simple task in isolation, very strict procedures, including footwork, governed the event's progression, and it took longer than one might expect.

As the priestesses neared the middle phase of their weaving ritual, a clergyman signaled me with his eyes. *It's my turn.* I rose with Suzuiro. I could hear the murmuring of the crowd and felt the gazes of the masses focus on me.

As the Wagtail Priestess, failure was unacceptable. At that thought, a spike of overwhelming anxiety impaled my whole body. I inhaled deep breaths. *Calm down. Calm down, Sai. You're okay.*

Abruptly, a specific memory floated to the surface of my mind. The nostalgic

back of a woman—my mother’s—as she unleashed her magic before a crowd while bathed in a blinding shower of light. Whenever my mother performed at festivals as the Wagtail Priestess in my faraway homeland of Sekirei Prefecture, I’d always watched her from behind. I’d admired her. She’d been the embodiment of beauty and inspiration to me.

Hot tears prickled at the corners of my eyes. It was almost as if my mother, whose parting was by then a distant memory, had given me an encouraging push. *Mom... I’ll do my best. So please, watch over me.*

I faced forward—without faltering, without doubt. I bowed toward the emperor in the shrine. Then I steadily walked around the plaza, one step at a time. I held in my arms a rattan basket filled with flower petals, sekka, and while reciting prayers, I strewed them as I circled the busy priestesses.

Beneath the bright, windless sky, clusters of blossoms flew into the air before floating down like snow. It was a ritual that would surround the weaving priestesses with a holy, purifying barrier. I drew a circle clockwise with my path, and when I closed the loop—

I found a surprise waiting for me, and my eyes widened, because the person delivering the replacement for my empty flower basket was the emperor in his female form. He was clad in the same attire as the other priestesses, and his delicate features were revealed for all the world to see like a work of art in a gallery. He wasn’t wearing his veil.

A merry breeze scattered the sekka and tugged mischievously on the emperor’s—on Haruiro’s—ivory hair. His lips, looking as ripe as a cherry in scarlet lipstick, pulled into a grin. Shivers ran down my spine from the nigh violent attack of beauty before me.

The emperor—the female edition—greeted me with a smile, almost like a shy flower bud opening into full bloom. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Wagtail Priestess.”

At the sudden advent of a goddess in the flesh, the attention of everyone present shifted from the Wagtail Priestess to the mysterious woman. *He didn’t tell me when he’d do it, but...I see now, this is the perfect chance.*

The entire audience had been invested in me until a gorgeous woman in

cherry blossom hakama unexpectedly showed up under my metaphorical spotlight. If she'd appeared at the beginning, awareness of the Wagtail Priestess would have been diminished, and my entrance not as impactful. On the other hand, if she didn't stand out, our operation would end in failure, which was why she'd chosen that exact moment. Next to me and Suzuiro—petite women both—her feminine stature would leave a lasting impression.

Lady Haruiro passed the rattan basket to me with soft hands. Her ivory hair was fastened in a lovely updo, flowers threaded through it like ornaments. Her elegance was almost unbelievable, a mirage in the desert.

“Thank you very much for coming to the Orient Empire. As the younger sister of Yukinari Kiriya, the General of the Left Wing, I would like to express my gratitude on behalf of all Oriental women.” Her voice was harmonious, her words weaving into an alluring melody like gentle plucks on the strings of a traditional Japanese koto.

She gave me a deep bow before making her exit. Everyone's eyes were still glued to her.

I hefted the rattan basket I'd received from her and shifted my gaze to look at the shrine once again. Beyond the sacred bamboo blinds I glimpsed the emperor's wings and the hem of his robes. *So...it really is someone else in there.*

I sprinkled sekka until my ritual was complete, then returned to my seat in the waiting area. I released a subdued breath. My fingers were trembling.

Soon the Houshoku Festival came to an end. And the good news was that one would be hard-pressed to find even the shadow of imperfection in the whole affair.

Chapter Forty-Five: Taken under the Wings of the Golden Eagle

ONCE the ceremony ended, I was swept up in the task of greeting many important guests and attending to the ones that approached me. Many older

men of affluence from a variety of fields gathered around me, wanting to catch a glimpse of the mysterious Wagtail Priestess. The last time I'd been surrounded by such a large crowd had been during my imprisonment in Centoria, when they'd been interrogating me.

"I must say, Lady Priestess, your chanting of the poems was wonderful as well!"

"Thank you very much for your kind praise."

"Lady Priestess, did you know Oriental poems before you came here?"

"I only knew those passed down in my homeland and a few of the more famous ones, so I would like to further my studies on the topic in the future."

"Ah, I could not tell at all! I shall be frank, I simply assumed that you had also performed divine rites in Centoria as the Wagtail Priestess!"

"Oh, that is not the case at all..."

The throng was so dense that it was as if a wall of human bodies blocked my vision. I had no idea what was going on beyond them, and people talked at me from every direction, all with great enthusiasm. My head was beginning to spin when—

Suddenly, the crowd frantically parted, clearing a path. Everyone prostrated themselves by pressing their foreheads against the stone tiles. The emperor had appeared with Lord Yukinari in tow. Immediately, I also kneeled and bent toward the ground.

"Raise your head. We ask that you stand and let Us take a good look at your garments." The emperor's warm voice rained down on me from above. He hadn't conveyed his will through Lord Yukinari—the emperor was addressing me directly.

I gave him a deep bow before getting to my feet, and through the gaps in his veil, I could see him smiling at me.

"Sai, the Wagtail Priestess. You have performed your duties well today. We are certain that this stunning weather is a gift from the heavens celebrating your respectable efforts."

“I am very honored.”

“We ask that you continue to work in harmony with the clergy, as well as the court ladies of Sekirei Palace, to bring forth pleasant winds of change and joyous occasion to Our empire.”

“Please allow me to express my gratitude for the faith you place in me. I shall devote all my efforts to answering your expectations.”

I bowed my head respectfully, realizing the emperor’s motive for the exchange. To stand next to and speak to me in his own voice before the masses—he was emphasizing his height and voice in contrast to mine, a petite girl’s. And... *Furthermore, he’s declaring to all these people that he is my patron. He went out of his way to make things easier for me and the Sekirei Palace in the future...*

When I lifted my head, the emperor met my eyes once more and sent another smile in my direction. Silently, he mouthed, “Thank you.”

Then the emperor took his leave. When he was completely out of sight, the nobles and merchants rose and dispersed in succession as if that was the natural course of action. They all wore a satisfied expression. The opportunity to hear the emperor’s voice in person was probably that great of an honor.

Finally, I was freed from the barricade of influential people. I let out a long sigh of relief. A breeze rustled through the spacious plaza, and at the same time, I heard a familiar, shrill voice.

“Ah! Lady Sai! *There* you are!”

Suzuiro ran over to me, her footsteps tapping a rhythm on the paving. To me, she was always a breath of fresh air. A smile wormed onto my lips as I looked at her, and I rallied myself to finish all my remaining duties.

Chapter Forty-Six: The Wicked Fox Has a Conversation with Yukinari

IN the wake of the festival, the imperial grounds were silent, almost unbelievably so.

During the ceremony, Yukinari had sat inside the shrine as the emperor's body double. He'd sported sham wings originally constructed in preparation for emergencies. And a while back, when the emperor rescued the priestess, he'd ruined his garments of white silk, and they were stitched back together for Yukinari's disguise. Once the festival had ended without any trouble, Yukinari looked for an opportunity to sneak away, change clothes, meet up with the emperor, and attend to post-event tasks. He was doing the latter at that very moment.

Dusk was sneaking up on the plaza, and there wasn't a single soul in sight—as if the bustling activity at noon had been a mirage. The many dignitaries in attendance were currently being entertained in the banquet hall. Yukinari was also scheduled to join the banquet after he supervised the last of the cleanup in person and conducted some final checks.

A cool, solemn voice called out to him. "Lord Yukinari."

The woman wore priestess clothing that fluttered in the wind—his wife. She greeted him with the deep bow of a vassal, then made a report on the priestesses she had overseen that day. Along with her verbal account, she also handed over a summary on paper.

"If there are no issues with it, I shall deliver it to the clergy before making my return," she said.

Yukinari scanned the documents. The writer was experienced, and her work errorless. "If you have business with the clergy, I shall handle that on their behalf. You may return now."

"Yes, my lord."

She was younger than Yukinari—the same age as Emperor Haruka—and she had long, ivory hair much like the emperor, while her eyes were the color of ash. She was a dainty woman with little color to her complexion and would likely blend in against a field of snow. Yukinari had never seen her lose her composure since their union in marriage, not even once; she was a mild-mannered woman. The daughter of a noble clan, she was very well versed in

festive matters and etiquette. In terms of leading the priestesses, she was far more skillful than male officiants, and Yukinari could always rely on her. *If there are more court ladies like her in the future, work will become much less taxing*, he thought.

After they parted ways, Yukinari walked down a long hallway to Tenyoku Palace, where his office was located. But before he could reach his destination, the abrupt appearance of a silhouette behind a pillar interrupted his trek. It was a boy with vibrant, fox-like hair who looked to be about the same age as the young attendants striding about the court.

The boy, Master Raiya, smirked, the ribbon of white silk that tied his hair rippling. He raised an eyebrow. “What are you doing, Advisor? Aren’t you supposed to be at the banquet?”

“There were many unprecedented aspects to the festival this year, and I had to examine many of those components with the guards and the clergy—the security and the purification rites, as well as the effects of the magic. His Majesty’s safety is currently in the hands of my subordinates and the General of the Right Wing.”

“Oh right, that guy was already back.”

“He said that he will make his departure a week after he finishes his report.”

“Huh.”

Yukinari glanced briefly at the boy’s striking, golden brown hair before saying humbly, “Master, I believe you should be more worried about yourself. Is it really all right for you to show yourself here without any disguise?”

The elder shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated motion. “Oh, it’s fine. In the eyes of people other than you and the emperor, I am but a tiny little magpie. It’s a similar technique to what the wagtail maiden did to the living remnants. You know about that, right?”

“I understand it in theory, but...”

Yukinari did not possess mana, and he had difficulty believing that the elder, who strutted around like he owned the place, looked like a bird to others. And when the Wagtail Priestess had claimed, “I changed the remnants into

magpies!” a few days prior... In truth, he hadn’t known whether she’d truly accomplished such a feat.

But the emperor and clergy, as well the elder, seemed pretty convinced by her reports, and they were mages, so she must’ve done it.

“I’ve got to say, Emperor Haruka is such an eccentric man.” The elder shook his head slowly. “I can’t believe he chose to ask the ‘Wicked Fox’ favored by his father for advice.”

“Master. Please keep the conversation short, if possible.” Yukinari paused. “If someone were to witness me talking to a magpie here, they might question my sanity.”

“Good point. Okay, let’s start with the results first.” He thrust something toward Yukinari, a familiar envelope. “Here are the precedents of court ladies since the Myth of Beginning that the wagtail maiden wanted, along with the findings of the land survey of the capital. I’ve also made a list of candidates from the clergy that are suitable for purifying the land, so make sure to tell His Majesty.”

“Thank you.”

After a lull, the elder muttered, “That aside, I’m really glad that maiden is a girl.” His youthful eyes narrowed and seemed to grow unfocused, staring into the distance. “She might be able to avoid the fate of being called the ‘Wicked Bird of Centoria.’”

“His Majesty requested your aid so that such a future does not come to pass.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Oh, right, I nearly forgot: that woman who was involved in the assassination attempt. Azusairo, was it? I hear that she’s going to remarry per her family’s wishes,” he revealed in a nonchalant tone.

Yukinari’s eyes widened, and he inhaled a sharp breath.

“She’s going to marry a regional official in a land far away from the capital,” the elder added, “and she’ll be the bride of a widower. She likely won’t ever have the chance to return to the capital again for the rest of her life.”

“...Did you pull the strings from behind the scenes?”

“Oh, how could I ever have such powerful connections?”

A jaded smile occupied the boy’s face as he looked up at Yukinari. The disillusioned expression appeared odd on his youthful features.

Yukinari had seen that expression on the boy before—back when Raiya used to look like the older mentor he was meant to be. On reflex, Yukinari straightened his back. The man had disciplined him thoroughly as a child, and his habits from then persisted even though Yukinari had since grown taller than his master.

“His Majesty is such a devious man,” the elder sighed as he continued to peer up at his former pupil through the lens of his glasses. “He caught his little bird and lets her work as she pleases, demonstrating her abilities to the entire country. Yet he’s not assigned a single man to her vicinity despite knowing that she needs a successor. Matchmaking? Preposterous in his books! Does he realize how contradictory his actions are? Ugh, he might as well just take her as his wife and lock her away, saving us all the trouble.”

“His Majesty probably has his own plans,” Yukinari said carefully.

“The wagtail maiden is a *woman*. Should he marry her, she would likely be a virtuous empress.”

Yukinari did not offer any protests to the man dubbed the Wicked Fox by the masses—because he didn’t have any. He could also tell that his master was teasing him on purpose.

“At any rate,” the boy said, “I’m looking forward to working with that girl from tomorrow on.” The whimsical youth tapped Yukinari’s shoulder lightly with the envelope before ducking behind a pillar. Not a moment later, a magpie flapped away with a rustle of feathers.

“Master seems to be enjoying himself,” Yukinari observed in a murmur. He watched his former mentor’s flight until the magpie disappeared into the distance, and only then did he head toward his office.

Chapter Forty-Seven: Staying Up and a Surprise Guest

THE emperor didn't summon me that night. After I finished my supper and a bath, I changed into clothes for tinkering, entered my workshop, and lit the lamp.

I'd repurposed a storage room that originally contained consorts' tools. Along the wall were cabinets of medicinal herbs, and in the center of the room stood a large workbench I had requested. The setup reminded me a little of the labs at schools in my previous life.

Arrayed on the workbench was a selection of ingredients for cosmetics, oil burners for simmering mixtures over flame, and diminutive glass flasks, among other equipment. Furthest from the fire sat glass bottles, which glittered as they reflected the light of the lamp. Herbs soaked inside them in dark-colored tinctures.

I didn't waste any time—I immediately began my craft of cosmetics. The first step was to prepare small, sterilized bottles, as well as boil water that had been purified with magic. Then I poured the water into a little flask, melted a tiny amount of plant-based fats and oils, and stirred it in.

The plant-based fat I was experimenting with was similar to the shea butter of my past life and had been manufactured in Meridiona. In Orient, they apparently used it as an ingredient in salves. When I'd asked for some as the Wagtail Priestess, explaining that I wanted to try it in my trial products, the merchant women shared some with me readily.

As for the herbal tincture, I'd initially made it with chameleon plant and rosemary, both of which had been readily available for harvest. That night, I poured an infusion of roasted tea into the small flask. A wonderful aroma filled the room.

"Is that...a success?" I muttered to myself as I held the flask up to the lamp, the light seeping through the glass. For the toners, I'd been very careful to implement measures of magical purification for preservation and the prevention of allergic reactions. In those departments, my products were of a higher standard than the general output of the cosmetic alchemists in Centoria. I would need specialized agencies to determine the exact time my wares lasted

before expiry, but I could estimate their duration by consulting the official standards of cosmetic alchemists and my own knowledge.

“Okay, next up.”

Little glass bottles of toner lined up one after another on the bench. After a dozen or so bottles, I’d finished allocating the flask’s contents, and I started preparations for making body milk.

First, I set up two oil burners, which looked like alcohol lamps. One was to heat the boiled and mana-purified water, and the second was to heat a water bath in which I placed a vessel. I added fats, beeswax, and a blend of several essential oils I’d readied beforehand into the vessel. I swirled the concoction slowly as the ingredients melted into one another. I wielded the spatula and stirred with my right hand while I positioned my left hand over the vessel and poured in mana. I didn’t have emulsifying wax, so I used mana as a substitute to temporarily change the attributes of the oils and make them soluble in water.

I sharpened my concentration, monitoring the states of the fats and beeswax by magical feel. Sweat formed beads on my forehead. The water on the burner beside the emulsion was on the brink of boiling, and I removed it from the flame before it could. Steadily, I stirred the hot water into the mixture of oils, fats, and beeswax. When that was complete, I snuffed out the fire.

“Okay, all that’s left is manual labor, so...”

I channeled mana into the spatula in my right hand and turned it into an automaton that spun around by itself like an electric mixer. Breathing out a sigh, I wiped away my sweat and stared at the spatula. Round and round it went, and over time, the concoction began to transform into a relatively respectable body milk.

I was fully absorbed in alchemizing cosmetics. So when I looked up on a whim, glancing beside me to find the *emperor there*, I nearly screamed. An indescribable noise grated in my throat, and my eyes stretched as wide as saucers.

“Ah. You finally noticed me.” Under the warm light of the lamp, the emperor smiled, and it was like watching a flower bloom in spring.

I nearly went weak in the knees, and when I stumbled, the emperor, looking startled, managed to grab my arm and steadied me.

“Are you all right?” he asked, concerned.

“Ah, yes, I am... My deepest...apologies...”

The hand grasping me was large, and his fingers wrapped all the way around my forearm. I also had to crane my neck to meet his eyes. Given the chance to study the male emperor up close, I noticed that indeed, he was totally different from his feminine form. When he’d stood beside me as a woman, his face had been right next to mine, yet presently, even after I inclined my head a little, there was still quite some distance between our eyes.

I’d spaced out, and the emperor smiled at me wryly. “I’ve been here for a while, actually.”

“Oh... You were...?”

“You really didn’t notice, huh.”

“Incidentally...how long *have* you been here?”

“Hmm, probably around the time you started humming your third cheerful tune.”

My cheeks grew hot, and only silence could express what I was feeling.

“It was quite an unusual melody. Was that a traditional song from Centoria?”

I buried my face in my hands. “Please forget everything you heard...” I couldn’t tell him that it was a song I’d heard often in my previous life. The emperor would get no more out of me on the subject.

I heard some shuffling.

“What are you making here?” He seemed to be peering at the body milk on the bench.

“A trial product of a cosmetic,” I replied.

“It’s so late though. Why now?”

“If I worked on it during the day, Suzuiro and the maids would feel obliged to help me... While I would like to offer instruction and make it together with

everyone, I haven't done enough testing to settle on a procedure or even what steps I want to take."

"Personally, I don't think you need to be so reserved about stuff like this, but... Well, there are times when I'd prefer to work alone too. I get that."

He picked up a small bottle and held it up against a lamp, apparently examining its contents. He had a few questions for me about the body milk's ingredients and effects as well as how laborious it was to manufacture it. I answered to the best of my knowledge. We repeated that exchange for a few other products, and eventually, the emperor put down the bottle.

"Sai," he began, "I admit, I was pretty surprised when you told me that you wanted to open up a new market for the merchants traveling to Centoria."

"My apologies, I made that proposal out of nowhere."

He sighed. "I remember telling you that you can take it easy in the empire. Oh well." He smiled fondly. "You're a hard worker, huh?"

"I was not brought up in this country, and I must not live off the taxes of the citizens of this nation..."

"And at the same time, you don't want to take money from the citizens of this country, so you chose to set your sights on foreign trade, huh?"

"Yes."

"But..." He hesitated. "Why cosmetics?"

"During my time in Centoria, I was involved with the synthesis of potions and enchanted medicines. Orient, however, has developed its own advanced system of pharmaceuticals, and apothecary merchants already have the means of mass production of good-quality medicine, which is distributed throughout the entire empire. To be frank, the technology you have here...surpasses Centoria by leaps and bounds, since there they rely too much on the magic of individuals. I will do everything I can to aid medical progress in Orient, but I believe that the help I can provide in that field is limited in nature."

The emperor remained quiet and listened to me patiently. I halted the enchanted spatula, scooped up some of the body milk, and let the thick

substance fall from a height. In doing so, I checked its viscosity. The concentrated, fragrant scent of herbs wafted into the air. I appeared to have found success.

“So,” I continued, “I asked myself, how can I monetize my abilities without disrupting this nation’s preexisting industries? That question plagued me for a long time. Then it came to me: if there isn’t a culture of commercial cosmetics, perhaps I could do that. And I was also sure that if the women of Orient took a liking to them, their first thought wouldn’t be to purchase them for private use. Instead, they would consider establishing an export market.”

“Congratulations on getting orders from the merchants. Handing out the samples was worth it.”

“I am very happy for their acknowledgment.”

“It’s your talent, Sai.”

“Well, rather than talent, it’s more of...” I trailed off, looking down at the bottles of cosmetics. “Back in Centoria, cosmetic alchemists produce skin care products, yet commoners do not have the means to procure them. So I thought that the current client base of Oriental medicine merchants would be happy if cosmetics were available to them as well.”

A good way to describe the target consumers of my products was people who couldn’t afford high-end beauty brands but were willing to throw down some money for affordable drugstore products. Those who had more than enough money to make ends meet, and even had some cash to burn, but were reluctant to purchase alchemical cosmetics, which had grand associations—people such as wealthy rural governors and well-off farmers, for example.

“Remind me, do you have a cosmetic alchemist license?” the emperor inquired.

“I have more or less all the licenses available, yes.”

“In that case, there won’t be any issues with you starting a brand.”

“Yes. In Centoria, the peerage system is an integral part of the society, and the hierarchy is very rigid. No matter the wealth one might accumulate, in the end, if they are of commoner status or minor nobility, their ability to spend that

money becomes limited. I believe that these cosmetics could sell well among those classes..." After rambling for so long, I suddenly felt my confidence deflate like a balloon. My cheeks burned.

The emperor smiled, the corners of his ash-blue eyes softening. "Your products will profit the merchants as well. Unlike medicine, which only sells when there is demand, the cosmetics business you have proposed will become an avenue of steady foreign income. As for what you have to work on, well... You'll have to make these bottles lighter. Traveling around with so many glass bottles would be difficult. For example, could you do something similar to what we do with medicine? Powdering products or drying them, distilling concentrates... If you're able to improve that aspect, it'll probably go smoother for you."

I nodded furiously at his suggestion. "I will try! Thank you very much."

The emperor stared down at me with unblinking eyes. Without a veil to obscure them, his gaze pierced me directly, and I couldn't look away.

He was a beautiful man—his hair was silky and white like the richest milk, and his eyes clear, bluish gray sapphires. His exquisite features were gorgeous under the illumination of the lamp, as if light had been sprinkled onto him like stardust. I couldn't help but gawk at him in a daze.

The emperor grinned, almost like a mischievous child. "What's wrong? You're spacing out."

"...It is just that, well, you are very beautiful, Your Majesty."

"Huh, I see."

"To talk alone with you like this is a very precious opportunity. I am very fortunate."

"Yeah... It really, really is." For a moment, his eyes narrowed, and pain seemed to flash through them. But it passed quickly, and he was all smiles again. "I've also wanted to talk with you like this for the longest time, Sai. For the longest time..."

"Your Majesty...?"

I wasn't sure why he wore such an expression, and I tilted my head in confusion as I looked up at him.

And then.

He cast a shadow over me as he leaned forward. Ivory hair spilled onto my shoulder like streams of moonlight. His face inched closer and closer...

Chapter Forty-Eight: Sweet Temptation beneath the Veil of Night

"BY the way, Sai."

"I am listening, Your Majesty."

After a lengthy pause, he asked, "Did you change the soap you use to wash your hair?"

Oh. That's why. I pinched a lock of my black hair. "I am conducting trials on soaps and oils specifically for washing hair."

"Ah, that's it. Your hair seemed much glossier than before, and I was wondering."

I hesitated. "I believe that the food here also plays a part. Ever since you brought me to this country, everything is a marvel that brings me joy. The food, the life I have here... *Everything.*"

The emperor appeared pleased by my statement. "In that case, I guess I'll give you a little treat, Sai."

"Wha..."

He reached a hand into his wide sleeve and took out a package of something. Judging by its size and softness, it was probably...

"Is that a steamed meat bun?"

"Nooot quite. It's a red bean bun."

I blinked. “Did you have that on you the whole time?”

“Yep, I did. But I couldn’t really find an opening to give it to you. Your singing was mesmerizing, Sai.”

“I, um...! P-Please, if you would, please spare me from that topic...”

He chuckled. “Aww, but you were so cute.”

The emperor gestured for me to sit, then plopped down next to me. He placed the packaged red bean bun on his palm and infused it with a small amount of mana. Lightning crackled between his hands for a few seconds, and, almost in the blink of an eye, hot steam began to rise from the bun.

He broke it in two and passed one half to me. “Here you go.”

“Thank you...” When I accepted the bun, I could feel its warmth seeping into my hands, as if he’d heated it with a microwave. “That is a very convenient ability.”

“Yep. I was born in springtime and have the blessing of spring, so lightning magic manifests easily for me, even if I don’t actively think about it.” Electricity sparked at the emperor’s fingertips, creating a blinding light far more intense than the lamp’s.

I prepared to bite into my bun, then realized my misstep with a start. “Ah, right. Shall I make some tea?”

“No, you really don’t have to. Let’s eat together while it’s still hot.” As soon as he finished his sentence, he brought the red bean bun to his lips and took a bite. From beside him, I gazed at him as he ate, suddenly reminded that yes, he was a living, breathing, human being.

“Thank you for the food,” I murmured before joining him and taking a bite out of my bun as well.

It was a strange situation, honestly—an emperor and a priestess indulging in dessert in a workshop late at night, both silent with cheeks puffed up like a hamster’s. Though that thought flashed in my mind, I couldn’t deny that the bun was quite delicious. The coarse red bean paste was sweet and flavorful, and as I savored every mouthful, I could feel my exhaustion flying away.

The emperor's tongue darted out to lick his fingertips, and he sighed in contentment. "Why do meals late at night always taste so good?" He looked like any ordinary man you'd meet on the street going about his life in his own merry way.

My chest tightened all of a sudden. I didn't know why. *It's just that... remembering that he's fated to die, spat on as a foolish emperor in some other world out there... It feels suffocating.*

"Your Majesty."

"Hm?"

I sucked in a deep breath. "I *will* protect you. I promise."

His eyes grew wide at my words. Then his lips pulled into a gentle smile. "What's on your mind? That came out of nowhere."

"As I watched you eat that bun, you seemed to be enjoying yourself, and my resolve hardened once again."

"Oh? I see. Thanks."

I took another bite of my red bean bun, chewed, swallowed, and nodded to myself with conviction. "I will become much stronger so that I can protect you. And I will also safeguard your body and your health by ensuring that you always have a plentiful mana pool to draw from for your official duties as emperor without chipping away at yourself. I will do everything I can; that is my vow to you."

"Thank you."

"You have always taken special care of me, and I *will* pay that debt in full."

"Sai..."

At the sound of my name, I lifted my eyes to his once again, and for some reason, the emperor appeared...restless? His brows were furrowed, and he was concealing his mouth with his hand.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

He hesitated. "Well, I mean... You becoming stronger would mean, you

know..." He trailed off. He lowered his voice and mumbled, "...Touching me, right?"

"Your Majesty..." For an instant, I had the delusion that the lamplight abruptly dimmed. The mood seemed to shift. I swallowed and repeated, "Your Majesty."

"What is it?"

"Shall we do it tonight as well?"

There was a pause. "No, maybe not. I mean, there isn't a bed in here, right?"

"Shall we head to my room, then?"

The emperor, who had been looking away, suddenly met my eyes, an odd, undecipherable expression on his face. He opened his mouth to speak but seemed to have second thoughts, as he promptly shut it.

After a beat, the emperor's voice hardened somewhat, and he asked in an interrogating tone, "Are you kind to everyone, Sai? Am I *really* the only one you'd say such things to?"

"You are the first man I have ever touched, Your Majesty."

"Not even that Holy Knight?"

"Holy...Knight?"

"Your former fiancé."

"Ah, *that* guy." I had completely forgotten about the man, so for a moment, I hadn't known who he was talking about. "The Holy Knight Commander... My former fiancé loathed how bizarre I was as the Wagtail Priestess. My guess is that even if we had married, I probably never would have confided in him about my abilities."

Ever since my arrival in Orient, everyone had treated me with hospitality and respect, and sometimes I forgot about my existence back in Centoria. There, the title of Wagtail Priestess hadn't been a silver spoon in my mouth that absolved me of all of life's stressors. It had been solely a responsibility—a burden—weighing down my shoulders... A bloodline passed down through the generations of my beloved family that I had to continue before I perished.

The emperor had saved me and brought me to his empire, and only then had I learned that my blood could be useful to someone else. The blood of the Wagtail Priestess could provide new occupations and politically benefit the emperor, and my powers could even light up someone's face with a smile. I couldn't describe how elated and moved I had been when I made that discovery. Orient had gifted me priceless, invaluable experiences that I'd never thought possible. So wasn't it only natural that I wanted to dedicate my life to the emperor before me?

Gratitude, joy, and determination swelled my heart, and I transformed my emotion into words: "I want to touch you, Your Majesty, because I am yours."

The emperor stared at me in silence before averting his eyes. *Did I offend him somehow?* But before I could expand on that thought, the emperor rose.

Faltering, he muttered, "I think it's about time I get back to Kita Palace. Don't stay up too late, okay, Sai?"

"Did my words offend you in any way...?" I asked worriedly.

"That's not the case. It's something else." He faced me and gave me a smile. His hand stretched out toward my hair...but ultimately, his fingertips merely brushed the adjacent air before his hand slipped away. "Sai, you think I'm a wonderful, glorious person, and I'm really not, so... Please, don't worship me so much; don't hold me in awe like everyone else. Because...you're the only person I don't want doing that."

He left Sekirei Palace, reconvened with his attendants at the arch bridge, and returned to Kita Palace. I watched his retreating back in its cloak of wings all the way until he vanished into the distance.



HARUKA walked back to Kita Palace slowly. He was alone—more or less. Guards tailed him, hidden in the shadows, but he could at least pretend he was taking a stroll by himself.

"I wanted to make up for how I worried her last time, but... Ugh, seriously..."

His cheeks burned. He knew what he looked like just then and hadn't wanted to meet the guards of Kita Palace in his present state, yet... In the end, he'd

caused them trouble.

He had hoped to choose his words a little more shrewdly and dispel her anxieties and any other deeply seeded fears in her heart. Sai had repeated the same sentiment she had many, many times before: an earnest—and nigh desperate—vow that she'd protect him.

She had lost much in her life. Her assets and family honor, which her ancestors had defended for many generations. Her parents, snatched away by Holy Knights and sent to the battlefield when she was but a young child. And in Orient, she was mustering her every effort to fulfill her duty as the Wagtail Priestess.

He sighed, and almost as if in prayer, he whispered, "I want... I *need* her to become so happy that she won't feel anxious, no matter what my end may be."

And for that to happen, he had to arrange her meeting with the "Wicked Fox of Septentrion" as soon as possible.

Fifth Arc: The Wagtail Priestess Encounters a Certain Mr. Fox

Chapter Forty-Nine: An Adventure in the Depths of the Department of Print

MORNING arrived. Though a curtain of darkness still hung over the world, the view outside the window was gorgeous. The garden, once akin to a neglected and unsafe park with its rampant weeds and overgrown paths, had undergone a transformation. The results of my daily maintenance, with the help of the gardeners, maids, and Suzuiro, had begun to bear fruit.

We'd progressed inch by inch, and eventually, the water canal that stretched from the inner courtyard and coiled around Sekirei Palace to reach the garden was clean and crystal clear. It was hard to imagine that the waterway had once been filled with mosquitos, pond snails, and murky moss. Given its new state of cleanliness, perhaps we could even stock it with goldfish.

Stretching beyond the garden into which we'd poured our blood, sweat, and tears was the sky, which was beginning to be painted over by the morning sun. And below lay the breathtaking backdrop of the capital, and further away marched the mountain range that sectioned off the sky and the empire. Each day, the snow on the mountaintops seemed to ebb little by little.

"Looks like summer is right around the corner," I whispered to myself.

With the help of maids, I finished getting ready before having a simple meal. Grateful for the food, I blew on the hot porridge and ate it leisurely while listening to the shrill chatter of birds outside.

A maid glanced at the pair of mated magpies perched by the window and smiled. "Lady Sai, look. Those are lucky birds."

The adorable, fluffy, black and white birds of fortune trilled and cackled in high-pitched song as they preened each other's feathers affectionately. Soon they flew away together with a rustling of wings.

"They look lovely, but their chirping is very intense," I remarked.

"Indeed. I heard that the citizens of Meridiona cherish their chattering and consider it a sign of good fortune. Apparently, the population of magpies has been increasing in their country recently."

I hope the magpies don't have a negative effect on Meridiona's ecosystem... Well anyway, thinking about invasive species in this world won't do me any good.

Their calls echoed out over the dawn; they were very energetic despite the early hour. Speaking of energetic, Suzuiro was taking a break from her job for a while. Although she'd already reported to her workplace earlier than she was supposed to, before she finally started employment as a full-fledged lady-in-waiting and living in the imperial palace, she had to help out with her family business during peak season and prepare for the move.

After breakfast and the rest of my morning routine, I headed toward the arch bridge, and waiting for me there was a rickshaw ready to take me to my morning prayers. The makeshift vehicle, which I'd constructed with magic, had been improved many times over. By then it was both impressively comfortable to ride in and easy to pull around.

"Lady Priestess, I have been expecting you."

"Thank you very much," I replied respectfully.

As a former maid who'd gotten around by foot, I still felt a little unworthy, but I had my duties as the Wagtail Priestess. I climbed into the rickshaw gratefully and, bouncing with its every jolt, slowly made my way to the halls of worship where I performed my daily supplication.

We crossed the arch bridge and passed through Kita Palace, sticking to the border of the premises as much as possible. The rickshaw wound around each palace on the imperial grounds as we advanced toward the first shrine. The detour was deliberate, because the passage of the Wagtail Priestess apparently

brought good fortune.

The morning wind was pleasant against my skin as I observed the scenery along our route. Through the gaps between buildings, I spotted young attendants hanging laundry. They were students laboring at odd jobs, and the future court officials of Orient. The water was lukewarm in late spring, which made their task easier, but they had a lot of washing to do and seemed to have their work cut out for them.

Hmm... Could we do something about that with magic?

While individual reliance on magic wasn't really a part of Orient's culture, tools that ran on magic were welcomed with open arms. I hadn't seen any in person but had learned from the maids that magic was utilized in a variety of places and ways throughout Orient—flood control, civil construction, agriculture, winter snow removal, and so on. Basically, it was a substitute for electricity.

And since it was their form of electricity, perhaps I could draw on my memories of my previous life—in which I'd heavily relied on electric appliances—as well as my knowledge of Centorian magic to develop more convenient devices.

If they exhaust themselves with manual labor in the morning, that might distract them from their studies, which would defeat the purpose. People might scold me for decreasing the workload necessary for teaching the students discipline, but just a few proposals should be fine. They can't get mad at me for thinking, after all.

After I finished offering prayers at all of the shrines in the imperial complex, I returned to Sekirei Palace bathed thoroughly in the scent of incense. Then, on foot, I once again crossed the arch bridge. No palanquin carried me across the extensive imperial grounds; instead, I opted to walk to my destination: the Department of Print, which the emperor had instructed me a few nights before to visit.

The Department of Print's function was relatively self-explanatory. The agency consisted of two parts: the national library of Orient and the office that oversaw it. The emperor had ordered me to enter a room in the deepest

recesses of the department.

I recalled his words. *“When you go in, remember this: Do not, and I emphasize, do not tell the court officials the name of the person you’re meeting.”*

Apparently, my job was to sort documents as an assistant to a one Raiya Ran. As I traversed the grounds, I could feel the gazes of court officials trailing after me. I wasn’t used to being the center of attention, and I feigned nonchalance as I straightened my back and pressed on.



THE building in question was some distance from the heart of the imperial complex and evidently its most ancient structure. In short, it was overflowing with books, dusty, and dim.

I addressed a civil official present. “Pardon my interruption. I am Sai, and I have been tasked with the administration of documents on behalf of Sekirei Palace by command of the emperor.”

Grinning from ear to ear, he replied, “I am aware. Thank you for allowing me to have the pleasure of viewing such a beautiful dance during the Houshoku Festival.”

I was a little taken aback by his attitude. “I am very honored to hear that.” I hesitated. “I would like to enter the Magpie Chamber. May I ask for directions?”

“Ah, you mean the book archive deep inside the building, right? Please follow me.”

He led me to a door, and when I opened it, I found a dusty room crammed with rows of bookshelves. Although mana-fueled lamps provided some light, it was nevertheless very dark. And for some reason, a magpie was tottering my way with tiny steps.

“Oh? You are...” I stared at it, fascinated. The magpie then flew into the depths of the chamber, almost as if guiding me.

I followed the little wings that weaved between bookshelves and, at a dead end, came face to face with a young boy sitting on a stepladder. *Is he perhaps a*

student researching something?

“Ah, it’s you,” he said. I could see his eyes narrowing behind the thick lens of his glasses as he became aware of my presence. “Chose to wear all black, hm? Well, don’t blame me if you’re as gray as a mouse by the end.”



The boy's curly hair was the fiery color of a fox. Tied back with a white ribbon, it was so long that it probably reached his knees. He wore a baggy garment, his sleeves rolled up and fastened with sashes. His jaw was sharp and defined, and his nose long and pointed. The image of a harvest mouse that I'd seen on my farm flashed through the back of my mind. As he sat on the tall stepladder looking petite and meek, I almost had the impression that he was perched on the flower cluster of a rice plant instead.

"Here. Take this." He tossed an envelope in my direction.

I gasped, dashing over to catch it. "Yes, sir!"

"Next."

"Done!"

"Next— Oh, and this too."

"Yes! And... Yes!"

Disturbed dust swirled into the air, and I experienced an involuntary coughing fit. While I was trying to recover, the boy nimbly descended the stepladder. Once he stood before me, I discovered that we were around the same height.

I tucked the envelopes under my arm and greeted him formally. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Sai."

"I'm Raiya, nice to meet you. And don't refer to me by my job title."

"Ah... Understood, Lord Raiya."

"Let's cut to the chase and get to work. Come."

Briskly, the boy strode further into the gloomy chamber. I almost felt as if we were exploring a cave. Not wanting to lose sight of him, I ran after him still clutching the envelopes. Even in the darkness, the ribbon of white silk in his hair was like a beacon.

As I trailed after him, a question arose in my head. *No matter how I look at it, he looks like a young boy around the same age as those attendants I saw this morning.*

A few days prior, buried in a pile of cushions, the emperor had said, "I want

you to help a civil official named Raiya Ran who's stationed deep inside the Department of Print. He used to be a mentor of both me and Yukinari a long time ago, you see. He's, well... A lot happened, and he might be a little hard to get along with, but he's a capable worker of a very reliable character, so... I'm counting on you, okay?"

If I was to believe the words of the emperor, the boy in front of me had been his mentor. Judging from their appearance, the emperor and Lord Yukinari were clearly older than me, definitely over twenty years old. Yet Lord Raiya, who looked like a young boy, was supposed to have been their mentor once.

Oh well, thinking about it isn't going to get me anywhere. Orient was a country whose emperor could easily switch genders, so there was no point in obsessing over outer appearances. I decided to trust that the boy leading me, his fluffy hair swaying behind him like a tail, was Lord Raiya, and I followed him without question.

The further we delved into the room, the dustier the air, in which the distinct scent of old books lingered. *Hmm, is this what a closed stack in a library would be like if it was never cleaned?*

Lord Raiya walked on without faltering until he came to the end of the row, where he halted, waiting for me to catch up.

"You've been coughing a lot," he noted. "Are you sure you're able to work?"

"Ah, I am all right. This is not an illness. It is just that...I am not very used to all this dust."

"Ahhh, I see now." As he spoke, Lord Raiya placed his hand over a portable lamp. With a crackle, it lit.

Oh, that was magic. It'd been a while since I last saw someone cast a spell.

Chapter Fifty: Understaffing and a Backlog of Paperwork, the Bane of All Government Agencies

I hadn't witnessed spellcasting in a long time, and for a moment, I felt moved for no discernible reason. Lord Raiya, meanwhile, took out his key and opened the door at the end of the stack.

Through the door was a vast desk and...*mountains* of envelopes. Though large windows occupied the walls, thick curtains locked out all light, and darkness shrouded the space in mystery. *Has he always worked alone in a place like this?* It was almost as if he were avoiding the notice of other humans. *The emperor also warned me to never say his name in public...*

"Now, about our work." Lord Raiya put down his lamp. "Before you arrived in Orient, you witnessed a harae ritual, right?"

"Yes. I was present when His Majesty purified a snow dragon."

"I see. Well, your task today revolves around that." He glanced around at the piles of envelopes. "All the letters you see here are written requests and accounts that we've gathered from all over the Orient Empire. I want you to sort through these letters and compile all the cases that require a harae ritual."

Mages were few and far between in Orient, and the resultant surplus of ambient mana could manifest as spirits of nature that spawned disaster. One of the duties of the clergy was to exorcise those spirits before that could happen, effectively nipping any calamity in the bud. The feudal lord of each region ranked the places they wanted purified by hazard level, then periodically relayed those locations to the imperial court. With those reports, the clergy planned a schedule of misogiharae for the year.

But the fact of the matter was that the governors couldn't be aware of all the spirits at any given moment—the snow dragon from a while back was a good example. Often, in the end, the clergy had to deal with cases as they arose. And by then, many of the spirits had already caused harm or trouble in some way.

Therefore, a new trial system was in place. The imperial court would not only collect the opinions of the feudal lords, but would also heed the voices of commoners in an attempt to determine sites that needed attention through the eyes of the people who actually lived there long-term.

At least, that was what I had surmised from Lord Raiya's explanation.

“Basically, that’s what happened,” he concluded.

I couldn’t help but marvel. “The literacy rate in Orient is very impressive, and I keep finding myself surprised...”

“That’s because during the reign of the previous emperor, schools that taught simple reading and writing to commoners were established throughout the whole empire. While they may not be able to read books, even women and children can read instructions for medicine or official announcements, and in terms of writing, they can informally jot down their observations at the very least.”

The Orient Empire was a nation of technicians, and the field of medicine was only one among many in which they excelled. Accordingly, the literacy rate was extremely high compared to that of other countries, and that was true across class and gender. As a result, when the government started to solicit the perspective of commoners, they had ended up with many, many more letters than they’d expected.

“I get that it’s necessary and all, but scrutinizing letters from all these commoners one by one sounds like despair itself.” He shrugged.

“It really is...”

“Most of the stuff here is ghost stories or gossip, or complaints not worth looking through. And when I say most, I mean *most*.”

“And...that means I have to sift through all this information and only note the ones we need, is that correct?”

“You catch on quickly. Yep.”

I considered the overflowing piles upon piles of letters. They were heaped on top of the desk, and if the emperor had been standing there, the mountain would have reached his height.

“Ah, by the way, what you see isn’t everything,” Lord Raya added.

“Wha—”

“Look behind you. Everything on the shelves against that wall too.”

I let out a little “Eep!” of dread.

He had sounded as if he were talking about the weather, but the implications were horrific. Color drained from my face, and Lord Raiya smirked as he sized me up from behind his glasses. “See? Do you get why I want help?”

“But...” I paused. “Is it all right for someone like me to be involved in this work?”

“Mm? What do you mean by that?” Lord Raiya tilted his head in question, resembling a cute little fox even more.

“This is an important role that directly affects the safety of this country, is it not...?”

“Yep, of course it’s important. It’ll affect the schedule of the clergy, and depending on how serious the situation, you might even influence the emperor’s official duties.”

I whimpered.

“But, well, it’s *veeery* cumbersome. I’m sure you can tell from how much work’s piled up.”

“Yes... I can.”

“And it’s not like we have so many staff around that we can specifically assign some people to this kinda stuff. After all, they’d have to parse the peculiar handwriting of commoners and puzzle out correspondence that might be written entirely in local slang. But civil officials with that much linguistic ability—and I’ll be honest here—mostly have other stuff to attend to. And...”

At that moment, Lord Raiya’s large eyes, hidden behind his glasses, narrowed. He stared right at me, almost as if appraising my worth, then grinned. “Ya can read zem, can’tcha, Dame Wagtail Priestess?” His sentence was a mix of accents and vernacular from several places. His big eyes remained trained on me.

I remembered some of the archaic and regional dialects that my mother had taught me and was able to decipher his speech somehow. “Yes, I believe so. I shall work hard,” I said slowly. He’d probably wanted to demonstrate how colloquial the letters would be.

His eyes bored into me for a little while longer. Then he changed the topic.

“Incidentally, I hear that you were the governor of Sekirei Prefecture—the Cutrettola lands. Is that true?”

“Yes...” I hesitated. “I was governor, though I only lived there when I was a child. After the passing of my parents and grandmother, I moved to central Centoria, so I left most of the management of my domain to the local council.”

“Did you leave everything up to them?”

“I did some work, such as passing on their requests to the king and making improvements to the farmland, as well as any work that required magic, but... My employment was located in the royal capital, so I have not contributed much to my domain.”

If I’d been in a more stable position as governor, I wouldn’t have needed to form an engagement with a family in the capital and leave my hometown in the first place, nor would I have been forced to work as a maid. In truth, I’d been a governor in name only, the Wagtail Priestess who’d merely inherited the demesne due to my blood. But I still loved my homeland, and the people there had been kind to me. That was why I’d once thought that my duty was to be useful to them—to form the best political connections possible in the capital via marriage. In the end...my resolve had been all for naught.

Currently, the Cutrettola lands were apparently under the direct administration of the royal family. So perhaps my exile had been a good thing, in a way. Although the territory was a remote province on the national border, if the crown was managing it, my former constituent’s voices wouldn’t be smothered by distance.

“Why are you spacing out all of a sudden?” He quirked an eyebrow.

“Ah, my apologies.” Frantically, I shook my head. “I was just recalling the past a little.”

“...I see.” Lord Raiya didn’t press for more detail.

“Oh, but...”

“Hm?”

“Pardon me, but is it all right if I air out this room first? I think I might have

been distracted in part by the dust.”

“Of course I wouldn’t mind.”

I parted the curtains and opened the window. The cool, early summer breeze sprinted into the room like a mob of mischievous pixies. Molten gold sunlight poured into the space, and for the first time, I noticed a mirrored ornament hanging from the lintel. It gleamed and glimmered, almost like a suncatcher, and whenever a passing wind tickled its surface, it scattered specks of light as colorful as an artist’s palette. The item seemed to be enchanted with magic that would ward off insects and prevent the humidity from rising too high.

“Anyway,” said Lord Raiya, “this is a job that, though urgent, can’t be dealt with hastily, so today, sort out as many as you can for now and report to me when you head back.”

“Understood.”

“If you come across stuff you don’t know, you can ask me. But I’m busy too, so it’d help me out if you ask everything in one go.”

He waved his hand lightly in farewell before returning the way we had come. After seeing him off, I quickly tied up my sleeves with a cord, magicked a handkerchief into a mask, and began to tackle my task.

Chapter Fifty-One: Lord Raiya, an Enigma

LORD RAIYA had been right—every single topic imaginable was fair game for the letters’ authors.

The floodbank of the river’s broken. I brought its repair up to the local magistrate but nothing’s being done. I’m scared of the rainy weather.

Anonymous, Village A

“This doesn’t count as a misogiharae matter. Okay, let’s check the posting date and put it under civil engineering,” I decided.

My wife hasn’t been visiting lately. It might be a curse.

Anonymous, Village B

The ill treatment of young, wedded women in Village B is horrid. My daughter ran back home, and she barely made it out alive. That village might be cursed.

Anonymous, Village C

The men of Village B have been kidnapping our women. Please stop them.

Anonymous, Village D

“...This seems like something that needs purification, but we should hand it over to the police first. Hmm, I need to ask about whom to go to for tasks that concern the country’s public security.”

A large doglike thing has gone on a rampage up the mountain, destroying the bamboo grove, and I can’t make ends meet.

Anonymous, Village E

Thirty years ago, the noble clergy performed a misogiharae on a tomb, but it’s swelling up again and turned into a mountain. I’m worried that a golem might appear and go berserk again.

Anonymous, Village F

Dead villagers are resurrecting and eating the living folks.

Anonymous, Village G

“These seem like they require urgent attention. If there are any similar reports originating from the same village, I need to remember to file them together.”

I even tried praying for rain, but it’s not working. What do I do?

Anonymous, Village H

There’s poor catch of fish and I’m troubled. Are the crab spirits overeating the fish?

Anonymous, Village I

“Hmm... It might be better for people familiar with the local area to take a look first before making a final decision. I’ll group similar cases together and...”

No matter how many envelopes I opened, the pile didn't seem to deplete at all. In fact, it appeared to be increasing in size, although that may have been a hallucination brought on by my growing exhaustion. My back and eyes were sore, so I decided to take a short break to stretch my limbs and straighten out my back. The work itself wasn't that complicated—I referred to a map of Orient while sorting the letters by area, content, and date—yet despite its simplicity, I nonetheless felt overwhelmed.

In my previous life, if I remember correctly, at times like these I would type it all up on a computer and sort it in one go, but...

I would have filled in a table with the time, location, category, and subject of each account, and the program would have automatically rearranged them according to my parameters. I could have searched with keywords, too. I wanted a spreadsheet. But... To fashion one with magic would be a very, very difficult task. If I'd had experience with building computers or writing software, it would have been a different story. Alas.

Hmm, it's not like I want to do anything fancy. I simply want to organize the data. In that case, it should be doable, right?

Alchemizing new materials with magic was nearly impossible. And even if I had the materials, I couldn't create anything with a structure I didn't understand. I began to ponder—something that could be made from components available to me and that possessed a familiar structure... Was there anything I could use as a substitute for a computer?

His Majesty and Lord Raiya probably don't anticipate me finishing this work quickly, I think. They've likely estimated it to take a week—no, maybe they assume that a month's time is normal for something of this scope. The letters are written in a style I have to decipher, and their contents aren't regulated either. On top of that, the ridiculous number of letters in total...

...Maybe my existence at court is problematic, so they chose to give me work with no end in sight... No, that can't be it. I'm sure that His Majesty and Lord Raiya both have high expectations of me. I can't let them down—

"Sai."

I started at the sound of my name and looked up. Lord Raiya was leaning on

the railing of the second-floor mezzanine as he peered down at me.

“It’s noon now,” he reminded me. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“Ah... I completely forgot.”

“If you don’t eat, you won’t get any work done. Go munch on something right away.”

“My apologies, and thank you.”

I stood and exited the building. Watching the many people passing by and feeling the gentle warmth of the sun against my skin, I had the startling realization that it really was already noon. To loosen my stiff body, I walked to the dining hall. Upon arrival, I was greeted with the noise of boisterous activity emanating from within.

I hummed to myself, a little apprehensive. “It’s full of men... I’m not sure about entering this atmosphere...” Even the simple act of traversing the imperial court attracted attention, so barging into the crowded hall would take a lot of courage. Anxiety overtook me.

Starting tomorrow, I should make a boxed lunch and bring that along instead... Resolving to do just that, I prepared to turn on my heel.

But then a chef emerged from the building and approached me. “Lady Priestess?!” It was the same chef I’d spoken to a while prior. “U-Um...! I had your meal sent to the Department of Print, but... Was it inadequate?!” His face was pale as he sank down onto his knees to address me.

Frantically, I reassured him. “Ah, not at all! I was considering having a meal here, but I understand that you delivered it to my work area. My apologies, it seems that we just missed each other.”

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear that.” He let out a huge sigh of relief. “I heard that your duties have led you outside Sekirei Palace, and to the Department of Print at that. I imagine it is a rather taxing endeavor. Since you are here, please go ahead and dine in the dining hall. I shall make preparations.”

“Ah, um, that is fine. It seems to be rather busy, and I do not wish to cause unnecessary trouble for everyone here. I shall wait for my meal in the

Department of Print from tomorrow on.”

I parted with the chef, who was very humble and respectful, and made my way back to the Department of Print. Heat rose in my cheeks. *Sometimes it slips my mind, but I need to remember that I’m no longer a maid—I’m His Majesty’s Wagtail Priestess, so I can’t move about thoughtlessly. I’m going to cause a hassle otherwise.*

Usually, I shut myself away inside Sekirei Palace and lived without a care in the world. I wasn’t used to the weight of my title yet. Feeling eyes on me, I retreated to the Department of Print almost as if in escape.

A male civil official regarded me uneasily. “Um, Lady Priestess... Your complexion looks a little pale. Did something happen?”

“Please do not worry. Sorry, I am still trying to adapt, that is all.”

Again, I had caused someone concern, and shame burned hot on my cheeks.

The man glanced furtively at our surroundings before whispering in a low voice meant to comfort me, “I am aware that you are toiling alone in the library, and it must be a tiring job, but please do not mind it too much...”

Wait... Alone? In my mind, I’d been sent there to assist Lord Raiya. *That reminds me, I’ve never seen Lord Raiya out in the open. And I only met him in the depths of that office.*

“Thank you very much for your concern.” I decided not to mention Lord Raiya, in case there was more to the situation.

“...Please do not push yourself too hard.” The civil official saw me off with worry etched on his face.

I fell deep into my thoughts, zoning out as I pressed on. Then, from behind, I felt something tap my back. Eyes widening with a subdued gasp, I whipped my head around to see Lord Raiya staring at me with narrowed eyes and a cunning grin. A letter was in his hand—that must’ve been what hit me.

“If this were the imperial court of the past, you’d have died from that stab,” he said coolly.

Chapter Fifty-Two: The Wagtail Priestess Tries to Turn Herself into a Computer

“**IF** this were the imperial court of the past, you’d have died from that stab,” Lord Raiya said coolly. He was neither running nor hiding. He stood there in broad daylight.

I hesitated. “So you *do* walk out in the open, Lord Raiya.”

“Of course I do. How’m I supposed to do anything otherwise?” he replied with a smirk.

I scanned our surroundings. Nobody seemed to be exhibiting an odd reaction to my conversation partner.

Nonchalantly, he spun on his heel to return to the office. From over his shoulder, he asked, “Where in the world did you wander off to? The attendant who brought over your meal was pretty panicked, you know.”

“My apologies, I was considering eating in the dining hall, so I went outside...”

“The dining hall?!”

“I am so sorry...”

“Well, I mean, it’s your choice. But how are you supposed to get there on an empty stomach? You were even spacing out earlier.”

“Y-Yes, you are right.”

“At any rate, finish your food quickly and get back to work, will you?” With that, Lord Raiya plunged right back to the depths of the building, his hair like a fox’s tail swaying as he strode away.

I turned to study the people around me. No one appeared to have noticed his presence at all. *I can tell he’s concealing himself with magic—likely in the disguise of a bird or some other small animal. A magpie, perhaps? But why go out of his way to do that?* There had to be a reason for his youthful form and efforts to keep a low profile. I internally sighed. *This job is hard. There are so many things I have to think about in addition to just getting the work done.*

I finished lunch swiftly and rushed back to the office.



THE menu for lunch had consisted of steaming white rice and pickles, and the latter dish, pickled with vinegar, was especially praiseworthy. It was delectable not only to my taste buds, but also my eyes: the leafy vegetable was beautiful, the underside of the leaves a lush purple. It was paired with shredded Chinese yams, producing an aesthetically pleasing combination of colors.

I'd never eaten some of the ingredients before, not even in my previous life, so I made a mental note to ask about them when I had time later. The tea was roasted as always, and the calming, pleasant fragrance cleared my foggy mind.

"Hmm... Going through them randomly is an option, but my desk has limited space, so... The best method would be to memorize all the letters, sort them in my mind, then summarize the information. But how do I do that?"

I'd brought some roasted tea into the office with me, and as I sipped on it, I slowly pondered how I should process the letters. An obvious choice was to blindly open them one by one and categorize them as I went, but the piles might overwhelm the desk surface.

"Even if I use magic... Magic can improve what I already have, like turning brooms into mops and threads into towels, but it can't create things from thin air..."

Glimmering light reflected off the suncatcher flickering in the corner of my vision. It shone particularly bright for one moment, and suddenly an epiphany dawned on me as if I were an oracle. *I can improve what's already there, which means...*

"I could stimulate my brain...and possibly make a spreadsheet program in my head... Yeah, that might be feasible."

I wasn't trying to do anything complicated like multistep calculations. Input into a table and a keyword search function would suffice. I merely wanted to arrange all the data in my mind, then write out the results with my hand and order the letters as needed.

Magic wasn't omnipotent, but it was useful. I could spell myself to run faster,

enhance my muscles, or bolster other physical capabilities. In theory, it could amplify the cognitive abilities of a brain as well.

“They’re all difficult spells, but with my strength now... I should be capable.”

I rose. I placed my right hand gently against my forehead and shut my eyes as I focused on the area below my navel deep within my abdomen. Mentally, I began to picture the torrent of heat located there. I imagined it climbing up my body and coursing toward my brain.

“I, who was given the name of Sai, shall now address myself. O my memories, become clear and detailed, as if I have etched them onto a stone tablet with 9999 lines. May the speed with which I search my recollection outstrip even light itself, and may my recall be more accurate and reliable than the force of a thousand men as it ranks, extracts, tallies, and prioritizes data—”

I poured mana into my own head and shaped the energy into what I desired. My scalp gradually grew feverish.

“No, I messed up, this is...”

My temperature was rising many times more rapidly than I expected, and I realized: I had misjudged my amount of mana. The more nights I spent with the emperor, the more powerful my magic became. And...I had underestimated that increase. *No, I can’t let this go on. My body can’t handle this much...!*

Once magic was activated, cutting off the stream of mana midcast was impossible. If you cut open a chrysalis before metamorphosis was complete, the insect inside would not return to a larva. Unless I endured and finished the spell somehow, I couldn’t return to my normal state. *I need...to come up with...a countermeasure—*

My thoughts grew hazy, and my consciousness was slipping away. And in that instant, an old memory surfaced.

When I was young, I once had a high fever. All children with mana would, without exception, experience a fever at least once as their mana rampaged in their body. My fever had lasted longer than normal, and for a whole two weeks, I walked the boundary between life and death. My father, a doctor, had fed me medicine while my mother rested her palm against my forehead as she nursed

me for many sleepless nights.

“I’m so sorry,” my mother had apologized to me. “It’s all because you were born from me, from a Wagtail Priestess... I’m so sorry you have to suffer so much because of me.”

My mother had always been a tough, courageous woman, yet in that moment, as her shaking hands caressed my forehead, her eyes had been full of tears. I had stared up at her in a daze, my mind cloudy from fever. *Don’t apologize. Don’t be so sad. Being born with the title of Wagtail Priestess has only brought me happiness, so don’t cry...*

Her cool hand had felt pleasant against my forehead. Her prayers and wishes were answered, and eventually, the pain eased. Was that perhaps because I felt more comfortable due to the chill of her hand?

...No. No, it wasn’t. Mom placed her hand on my forehead...to direct...my magic outside... Oh, I see! If I have a medium to control and restrain my magic, then...!

Desperately, with both hands, I gripped the thin silk draped over my shoulders.

Chapter Fifty-Three: The Beautiful Young Man with a High, Fox-Like Ponytail

WITH both hands, I desperately grasped my silk shawl. Thread spun by silkworm spirits was an excellent medium for magic. The moment my grip tightened on it, the fine silk started to glow, and I could feel it become a part of me as my magic poured into it.

I began to process the mana and data so I could decrease it to an amount that my brain could handle. The information streamed down from my mind to my arms, then into the thin cloth that linked my hands. Swirling, it arranged itself inside the fabric. The mental burden eased by leaps and bounds, yet I was still barely clinging to consciousness.

“Sai!”

For a moment, I thought I heard someone calling my name from a distance. The frantic tapping of feet approached, and then there was a sensation of weightlessness as my body seemed to float into the air.

I'd only just realized that I had collapsed to the ground. Someone had just lifted me in their arms. A large hand pressed against my forehead. It was pleasantly cool, and the joints pronounced—a man's hand. Long, curly hair the color of a fox. Verdant eyes so stunning, they blinded me. From beyond glasses a furious glare.

“You foolish girl... Oy, if you can hear me, focus on my palm and lean your consciousness against it! Use my mana circuits! Right now!”



The voice of a man. A young man with an alarmed look on his face, and he was trying to save me. His build was slight and almost delicate—perhaps just as delicate as Lord Raiya’s. He was a civil official with vulpine hair tied in a high ponytail. The long strands cascaded down his back and gently brushed against the ground. His large, bespectacled eyes were familiar to me, and I had the notion I’d seen them somewhere before.

After I managed to make those observations, I noticed that my body felt much better. My fever was gone. In that state, I would easily be able to finish my “calculation” by manipulating my mana. I shut my eyes once more and, with his aid, focused on completing the spell.



IF we considered only the outcome, it’d been a huge success. I could organize the information in my head and project it onto the thin cloth of my shawl like a monitor. I could see the data represented on the screen in real time as I mentally interacted with it, which meant that I’d accomplished what I had set out to do: recreate the functions of spreadsheet software in my brain.

I showed the results of the magic to my savior. He chose to remain silent at first as I demonstrated the whole process and explained the mechanism. Then, well... He gave me a thorough scolding.

“If I hadn’t realized, you’d have died, you know?! Ugh, the living remnant incident at Sekirei Palace only just got resolved! Were you planning on creating a second “haunted” property in the imperial complex or something?! Could you *please* not?!”

“My most sincere apologies. I was too thoughtless. I was only able to find success because of your magic, sir. I could never thank you enough.”

“Seriously... In Centoria, there might have been a lot of mages around that could save you, but if I hadn’t been here, you’d be toast right now.”

“Yes, sir...”

Honestly, it was nothing short of a miracle. The man passing by had just so happened to be a mage. On top of that, he possessed mana circuits so powerful that he could quell my rampaging mana.

I bowed deeply to him. "It is because of you that I have safely gained the ability to sort out all this information. Now I should be able to efficiently finish the job given to me by Lord Raiya, the Chief of Books. Thank you very much."

"Wait. You...nearly died because you wanted to sort through this stuff?"

"Yes."

"Think twice before you use your powers! You birdbrain! I didn't tell you to go this far, you know!"

"I will... My apologies for using magic before seeking counsel..." Yet something suddenly bothered me. "Um, sorry, did you just say 'I'?"

"I can't believe you."

"I-I'm very sorry."

"You felt my mana circuits and even touched me, and you still can't tell? I'm Raiya."

"...What?"

The man before me combed up his hair with his fingers, looking exasperated as he let out a lengthy sigh. And after studying him carefully, his fox-like hair, his glasses, his large eyes, his features, his clothes... They were identical to that of the young Chief of Books. I never would have thought that the adorable boy would mature into such a beautiful man. The emperor was elegant, nigh dainty, and the young man in front of me seemed slenderer still, his limbs long and slim. He had the air of a stern civil official.

After an extended pause, I finally found my voice. "I...see..."

"At any rate, you can take it easy for the rest of the day. If something unfortunate happens to you, I'm going to lose my head."

"My deepest apologies, I was completely useless..."

"Oh, you're so dense. I'm telling you to rest today, okay? I'm counting on you to process the info tomorrow using that ability of yours. You made me go out of my way to help you, so you better work hard to make up for that."

"...Yes, sir!"

“Okay, I’m gonna get back to my work then.” He stared at me as if to emphasize his point. “Don’t do anything else unnecessary today.”

So, until the bell tolled to signal the end of the day, I spent the afternoon figuring out my new faculties of analysis and resting my mana circuits. If I overworked myself further, my fatigue could affect my performance the following day and beyond, and I didn’t want that.

When I bid farewell to Lord Raiya before leaving, he was once again wearing the form of a young boy, just as he had that morning. He evidently preferred that guise, employing mana to maintain it. *Does he take on this appearance because of circumstances revolving around his magic? Or something else?*

“Sai, make sure to never tell anyone about that other form of mine.”

“Understood.”

So that I could return to work in full health the next day, I immediately prepared to retire for the evening after arriving back at Sekirei Palace and allow my body to recover.

Chapter Fifty-Four: A Real Genius

STARTING on my second day at the Department of Print, I went to the office equipped with a lunchbox and water bottle.

A maid around the age that my mother would have been lamented as she handed me my lunchbox. “You are the great Wagtail Priestess! I cannot believe you have to toil from morning to night like an ordinary court official...”

“If I can be useful to His Majesty, I welcome such opportunities,” I answered.

“Is that so? Still, please don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Thank you...” Seeing her concern, I gave her an awkward smile.

Frankly, in Centoria, I’d had to slave nonstop from dawn till dusk, while in Orient, I worked only during daylight hours and everything else was prepared for me. In truth, I felt a little restless. Delectable meals and clean clothes were always ready for me, and I even had a workshop, furnished with all the tools I needed, where I could research and develop my products. The maids and ladies-in-waiting interacted with me with a familiarity that was just right, and the court officials were very kind to me too.

I had nothing but gratitude in my heart—toward the emperor, whose years of groundwork allowed me to live without trouble as the Wagtail Priestess, as well as toward the people of Orient.

The maid was updating me on the operations of Sekirei Palace. “Per your instructions, we are carrying on with the harvest, drying, and extraction of medicinal herbs. Today we are scheduled to receive information about the estimated date of arrival for some of the ingredients we ordered, and I shall report back to you after your return. If there is anything else you would like us to do, please tell me.”

“Thank you very much, you’re a great help.”

Though I was helping out in the Department of Print, I wasn’t neglecting my cosmetic manufacturing. I’d grown close with some of the merchant ladies after the tea party a while back, and we exchanged letters often. Through the

women, I was forming connections with their husbands—the clan heads of those mercantile families. The day before, a couple running an apothecary business had gone to the trouble of visiting me during lunchtime, and we’d managed to have a brief conversation about our future plans.

There was a *lot* on my hands. Expectations for the Wagtail Priestess weighed on my shoulders, and I had to work hard to not let everyone down.



UPON entering the office in the Department of Print, I wasted no time in tackling my task.

“First, reports from this prefecture go on this shelf. This prefecture goes on this shelf. As for how I should order them, what was it again...”

My shawl was floating in the air, serving as a screen that displayed the information I needed. Naturally, I reined in my magic when other court officials came by, but in general, only Lord Raiya frequented the office assigned to me, so I didn’t really have to hold back at all. *Lord Raiya must be keeping people out for my sake... I can’t thank him enough.*

For an expedited explanation of the complicated mechanism behind my new ability, the procedure was something like this: First, I flipped on the “switch” in my head. I scanned all the letters with my eyes and memorized them. Then I sorted the memorized information into categories based on prefecture and subject before projecting the necessary data onto the “screen.” Next, I temporarily turned off my mental switch as I sorted the letters in front of me in reference to the screen. After inserting labels with comments, I filed them away on shelves. Lastly, I summarized each prefecture’s letters in one document to use as an index for that region.

I’d committed Orient’s geography to memory, so I could also process incidents of interest that occurred across several prefectures. In addition, I asked the officials for a large sheet of paper like the rolls of Japanese vellum prevalent in schools in my previous life. I pinned it to the wall, drew a simplified map, and pasted important details onto it. I didn’t have sticky notes like in my past life, so they were stuck on with starch glue instead. Well, one couldn’t have everything in life.

I settled into a cycle of reading, flicking the switch on, off, then moving my hands around. I labored on quietly, and the days flew by.



“SAI.”

Hearing the voice of a young boy, I snapped out of my routine with a start. I turned to find Lord Raiya standing there with the warm sun of noon illuminating him like a spotlight. He let out an exaggerated sigh before saying, “You’re concentrating too hard. Do you know how many times I called your name?”

“Ah, I am so sorry.”

“I’ve got to say though, how did you even come up with such an unusual method?” He approached with a light flapping of his shoes and stared at the shawl in the air, fascinated. His shoes were sized for an adult, hence the noise.

With a touch of concern, he asked, “You practically collapsed when you tried it the first time, and I was really doubting it’d pan out, but huh. I see, that’s what you wanted to do.”

“Sorry for all the trouble I caused you then...”

“You really did.” He sighed.

A week had passed since I began working in the office, and in the end, I’d only witnessed his older form the day I nearly fainted. He rarely transformed into an adult, yet his clothes all seemed to be measured for that version of him.

Observing the screen, he remarked, “Huh, I see. You’re not writing it down, which means that you can switch to all kinds of information instantly. You don’t have to read through the letters carefully either; you can search through it all in one step to find the text you’re looking for... And the number of results and the locations of the results are all shown here. The calculation takes place in your brain, and what you see with your eyes is only the output of those calculations, not the process... To decrease your burden, you standardized all the text characters and displayed them in the same style. Wow, I’m pretty impressed. How did you come up with this?”

As he mumbled to himself, he suddenly seemed inspired, and he pivoted to

face the wall. The boy reached one of his palms out toward the surface and started to mutter in a voice too quiet for me to decipher. His fingers moved almost as if he were typing on a keyboard.

And then.

Instantly, accompanied by an intense glow of magic, characters faded into view against the entire wall. The gleaming text looked rather like calligraphy in fluorescent paint.

I gasped, my eyes widening in awe.

“Hmm... This doesn’t seem right. Ah, how about this?” The young civil official waved his fingers and began to adjust the font size and alignment. Printed on the wall was what appeared to be a poem. “Okay, I get how you project the information in your head—you’re not picturing the final results in your mind. Rather, using magic, you’re turning the area where you want them to appear into an extension of your mind...”

“You are amazing...” I couldn’t help but praise him.

His eyebrows knit together in obvious irritation. “Hey, was that meant to be sarcastic?”

Frantically, I apologized, “Sorry, that is not what I mean at all...!”

“Ugh, geniuses. You lot are all like that. Haaah, can’t stand you guys sometimes.”

Hesitantly, I said, “My innovation is not that commendable. I am only, well... I happened to have some inspiration and am only imitating what I know. But you were able to replicate it just by seeing it, Lord Raiya. I could never accomplish the same feat.”

Lord Raiya shrugged his delicate shoulders. “Well, can’t call myself a mage if I can’t do this much. More importantly... This makes me really hungry. Let’s go eat already.” With that said, he turned on his heel and started to make his way out of the room. “Sai, I’m going to leave you behind at this rate.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Was he perhaps willing to eat together with me?

I quickly tidied my desk and chased after Lord Raiya's waving, fox-like hair.

Chapter Fifty-Five: Please, Don't Wither Like I Did

IN a room with windows facing the inner courtyard of the Department of Print, Lord Raiya and I lunched together. The brilliant green foliage and pleasant breeze made it a wonderful place of respite.

"I hear that in Centoria, the daughters of noble households go to school. Did you learn at one of those institutions as well?"

"No, I never went to school. My parents and grandmother taught me everything I know. Reading, writing, math..."

He paused. "But House Cutrettola is a noble household. And a prestigious one that dates all the way back to the founding of Centoria at that."

"In terms of social standing, perhaps, but that was all we had. I was originally supposed to enroll in a school near the capital, and then my parents, who were dispatched to the area of conflict with Meridiona, passed away, so that came to nothing."

Lord Raiya was quiet for a moment. He stared at me unblinkingly. "But you still continued to study by yourself as the Wagtail Priestess."

"Oh, you can tell?"

"Of course." He smiled and brought some food to his lips. "While your quick wit is a talent you were born with, I've observed countless examples of creativity and shrewdness in you that belong only to someone who chose to take their education upon themselves. You are a girl who has persevered diligently."

"Thank you..." I muttered slowly.

"But you take things way too seriously and feel responsible for things you don't need to. If you collapse because you're always driving yourself into a corner like that, you'll be a nuisance. Learn to do things in moderation."

“Yes, sir...” He sounded exactly like a teacher. “Um, if it is not a bother, may I ask you something? Lord Raiya, why do you usually take on a younger form?”

“Oh? Curious, are we?” He peered up at me with a meaningful gaze, calculating like a fox. A shadow fell over his features, odd on his youthful face, and one corner of his lips twitched in a cynical smile. “It’s a simple story, you see. It’s a curse—I’m sure you’ve heard of those. It’s a curse...from the previous emperor.”

The previous emperor. The man shows up again.

“The previous emperor,” said Lord Raiya, “or Emperor Harunire, made reforms to the imperial court. And the founding of the harem was one of them. You know that, right?”

“Yes. I heard that the palace since repurposed as Sekirei Palace used to be the Inner Palace that housed the harem.”

“It was unprecedented, you know. It was the first time in Oriental history that a large-scale residence for women was constructed on imperial grounds. The emperors of each generation married and took a wife, yes. But ultimately, those empresses only served as vessels for the next Amawashi. The empresses and their families were the emperors’ subjects—they had the duty of protecting and raising the crown prince until he reached a certain age, and when the child grew wings, they would return the crown prince to the imperial palace. That was how it worked.”

“I see... In that case, a harem or an Inner Palace for women wouldn’t have been necessary.”

“That being said, if an emperor wanted to wed a woman who didn’t have a family home, he’d have to build a residence for the empress inside the imperial complex, you know?” The corners of his lips pulled into an impish grin as he gave me a look.

I had the feeling that he was somehow teasing me in a very roundabout way, yet I couldn’t decipher what he meant. I tilted my head. “I believe it unlikely that such a lady would ever become an empress... I think.”

A beat of silence.

I hesitated. “Um, did I say something offensive?”

“Oh well, whatever... At any rate, when the Inner Palace was established, so were a bunch of new specialist court positions. Some of them were so ridiculous that looking back, they were pretty hilarious.”

Lord Raiya’s eyes seemed to glaze as he witnessed a distant memory. He sipped his roasted tea and crossed his legs. Though his eyes were fixed on the courtyard, he appeared to be recalling something he didn’t really want to remember.

“For example... That one palace was filled with women, and one or two male bureaucrats had to enter it eventually. But think about it. A man walking into a paradise of women. Naturally, there would be objections to that, because what if there was infidelity or something? Ugh, such nonsense.” Lord Raiya didn’t even try to hide his disdain.

“H-Huh.” I didn’t know what to say and could only nod vaguely.

“I mean, look at the present. Only men with the permission of His Majesty are allowed into Sekirei Palace, right? Craftsmen, student pages, or the General of the Left Wing.”

“Ah, now that you mention it, yes.”

“So. As you can see, in this case, we needed men who weren’t really men at the same time—do you know what I mean?”

“Wait, do you mean...?” I paled.

“Exactly.” His eyes narrowed as he smirked. “The bureaucrats in charge of managing the Inner Palace were forcibly changed into prepubescent boys by the emperor’s magic. After all, a child could never commit adultery.”

“...Ah, that’s what you mean.”

“Hm? What, were you thinking of something else?”

I faltered. “Well, it is just that... In the past, I have heard of a nation that, um, took very extreme and fearsome measures to prevent infidelity, so much so that I hesitate to even speak of it... And I assumed that was what had happened...”

“Huh... Anyway, I was forced to take this form. When the previous emperor left the world of the living, his spell also weakened, so I guess I could return to my original form if I wanted to.”

“Is the curse...going to last forever?”

“Who knows? All the other guys asked Emperor Haruka to lift their curse, but I’m not interested. Besides, I can take on whatever appearance I want using my own magic.” He shrugged, looking as if he didn’t care at all. “I’m not that invested in my original form either, so even if I stay this way, it’s not a problem for me. The physical body, in the end, is nothing but a mere vessel for the soul.”

A strange thought occurred to me: perhaps he was fond of his child form. With his expansive mana pool, it should have been easy for him to turn back into an adult. *And... It’s also the first time I’ve ever heard the name of the previous emperor.*

“Lord Raiya. In your eyes...what kind of man was Emperor Harunire, may I ask?”

At my question, Lord Raiya leaned back with a jerk, and his eyebrows knit together fiercely. “Hah? Are you investigating something? Your questions are scary, you know.”

“Huh? Oh, I’m sorry. I...just wanted to know.”

“Know what?”

“The people of this nation are kind and mild mannered, yet whenever the previous emperor is brought up, they all display a drastic change in attitude. Without exception, they all speak ill of the man and... As the Wagtail Priestess, I feel that I need to know more about him, even if I can gain only scraps of information.”

He harrumphed. “What’s the point in learning about a government that only knew how to mess up?”

“I do not want to judge what kind of person Emperor Harunire was based solely on rumors. He was the beloved father of His Majesty, and...” I was struggling to find the right words, and I trailed off, thinking. Lord Raiya glowered at me expectantly. I took a deep breath. “In Centoria, I was falsely accused of

witchcraft and nearly executed.”

His large eyes widened.

My thoughts about the previous emperor, which had amassed starting from the day I arrived in Orient, began to trickle toward my mouth. I had the feeling that I could confide in the person before me—in Lord Raiya, who spoke the previous emperor’s name with nostalgia.

I pressed on. “In my homeland, I learned the taste of despair when nobody came to my rescue. People I’ve never even met chose to believe groundless rumors blindly. People I used to exchange banter with happily also slandered me, spat at me... My every action, my every gesture was seen in a negative light, and they scorned me... I lost many precious things, too... I am sure that even now, there are many people in Centoria who condemn me as a witch. Everyone in this nation welcomes me with open arms as the Wagtail Priestess only because... Not because of my own merits or efforts, but because the emperor and those around me kindly built a good reputation for me.”

“...So, do you mean that you dislike considering only one aspect of a matter—the judgment of the masses?”

“Yes, I do. That is exactly why I want to learn about the previous emperor, whom everyone is reluctant to talk about.”

Lord Raiya listened to me in silence. He cast his eyes down at the roasted tea in his hands. He appeared to be thoroughly mulling over something.

“Lord Raiya, you do not seem to dislike the previous emperor,” I stated cautiously.

“What gives you that impression?”

“This is the first time that I have met someone in Orient willing to say the previous emperor’s name. And that white silk ribbon you tie your hair with... It looks too worn to be a blessing from the current emperor, so I thought that perhaps you are still using a gift you received from the previous one...”

Like needles, Lord Raiya’s gaze pierced me. There was a shift in his eyes behind his glasses—and almost a warning in their intensity. I sucked in a breath.

“You are too sharp. I would advise against blabbering about everything you notice. By now you should’ve realized that the imperial court is like a beast, its gaping maw ready to snap shut. Don’t trust me so easily.”

Color drained from my face. “...My apologies.”

But then he let out a small sigh, and the tension melted from his body. A smile overtook his countenance. “Could you pour some more roasted tea for me?”

“...Yes, sir.”

“Be careful. Please, don’t wither like I did. Don’t act in a way that could make my pupil—make Emperor Haruka’s affections go to waste.”

He accepted the tea from my hands and switched the position of his legs. He leaned heavily into the back of the chair, his body sagging. As he fidgeted with the warm cup in his palm, he whispered in a small voice, almost as if talking to himself, “An idiot of a man, that was what he was. He was definitely a foolish emperor.”

Wind blew around us, pulling on the ragged ribbon that secured his hair. With a rustle, the white silk brushed against his face, and wearing a rueful expression, Lord Raiya pushed it away. “It’s an annoying topic, and, well, I can’t really talk about it on the spot. Give me plenty of time to tell you on another day,” he said.

Chapter Fifty-Six: The Foolish Emperor and the Wicked Fox of Septentrion

“**THE** previous emperor wanted to quell the disorder in the political climate of Orient by becoming ‘human.’”

A day had passed since my and Lord Raiya’s last conversation, and that afternoon, while working with me in my office, he started to tell me about the previous emperor almost as if he were unraveling an old tale.

“If we want to talk about the previous emperor’s rule, we need to first go

back and start with the generation before his... Don't worry, it's nothing too complicated. I'll make it brief. During the reign of the emperor before Emperor Harunire, your homeland, Centoria, fell into great discord—there was a poor harvest due to abnormal weather, and an epidemic ravaged the kingdom. Do you know about that?”

“Yes. Due to the resulting social unrest, a rumor began to circulate that the medicine merchants of Orient transmitted the disease. That caused tension between the two nations.”

“Whoever came up with that was a fool. If Orient spread the disease and then lost the trust of our clients, how would we make ends meet?” Lord Raiya gave me an exaggerated shrug. He held in his left hand a letter, which he read and memorized, and his right hand faced the wall, projecting the information he'd just processed.

Although we were talking as we sorted, it didn't impede our progress at all. Lord Raiya had adapted to the mechanism of the “switch” very quickly, and he was gaining practical experience as he applied the theory to one letter after another. With experience came speed, and he was growing more efficient as he went. I was taken aback by his quick wits and capabilities and made sure to chip away at my task as well.

“In the end,” he concluded, “Centoria was the one that suffered because of that. They lost the aid and medicine of Orient.”

“Well, I am not surprised.”

“The tension kind of got forgotten along the way and didn't escalate into a war, thankfully, but...grudges remained. And it was during such a time that Emperor Harunire inherited the throne.”

Orient had helped Centoria in many ways back then. They'd allowed mages to take refuge in Orient and had made other humanitarian efforts for nothing in return. They'd been much more generous than the other nations on the continent, Meridiona and Occidenia.

He continued, “So, in Orient, people were unhappy. They began to say, ‘Why in the world should we be so subservient toward the ungrateful Centoria, which slandered us groundlessly?’”

“That...is a very understandable reaction as a citizen of Orient.”

“On that topic, why *was* Orient so passive toward Centoria back then? Well, the root of the cause lies in the political climate of Orient at the time. First, the assignment of bureaucrats was completely different—all the positions were fully hereditary. And for a few hundred years, the imperial court had been conservative about forming diplomatic relations with other countries. So the citizens couldn’t make any bold moves or make their opinions known. They could merely follow the command of the government.”

“Does that mean... The merchants actively traveled outside the empire to sell medicine, putting their focus on the outside world, when the government’s stance was different?”

“Exactly.” Lord Raiya nodded. “And that caused more problems.”

“What might those problems be...?”

“The imperial court was a few steps behind in the matters of foreign countries, and in contrast, the merchants were very knowledgeable about international news. The merchants, in fact, were the first to learn about the slander going on in Centoria. Yet neither that information nor the merchants’ sentiments reached the imperial court, because the societal classes were too separated. The rift between the imperial court and the citizens grew deeper... and the empire became increasingly unstable.”

Lord Raiya’s hands seemed to freeze in the middle of his work. He let out a small sigh, looking wistfully into the distance. “By the time Emperor Harunire ascended the throne, the position of emperor was more of a hollow title for tradition’s sake. But then he intervened with the government and passed political reforms. He arranged public hearings so that the imperial court could listen to the merchants’ concerns. He abolished the hereditary succession of local magistrates. He intentionally delegated important roles to bureaucrats without powerful family backgrounds. He introduced the civil service exams, and so on...”

He paused. “For instance, he promoted a descendant of the now destroyed Septentrion to the post of Right Legate and entrusted this man with the administration of the Inner Palace as well as the management of diplomatic

relations with other nations.”

“The Right Legate was, if I remember correctly... In Centoria, it would be equal to the highest possible government office, our minister. Is that right?”

“Yes. In Orient, in accordance with the wings of Amawashi, all bureaucratic posts come in pairs of left and right. The Right Legate was the Right Minister, basically. None but the Left Minister was of higher rank, so it wouldn’t be exaggerating to call the Right Legate the second-highest position in the government.”

I hesitated. “He chose a surviving descendant of Septentrion to take over such an important function...”

“Well, we say ‘descendant,’ but Septentrion fell to ruin a long, long time ago.” Lord Raiya gestured toward the map stuck on the wall with a jerk of his jaw. Septentrion had been a small country nestled between Occidenia and Orient. Its territory had since been divided between its two neighboring nations, and the chunk in Orient was called Kitasakaibashi Prefecture.

He then muttered, “Septentrion had its end coming. It didn’t have the military might of Centoria, nor the plentiful resources of Occidenia, nor even a medicine industry that enabled them to conquer an unfavorable environment like Orient had. The only thing they had going for them was their high percentage of mages and unique methods of magic application—an asset that depended wholly on the abilities of individuals. And even that didn’t last. The corruption of the country withered their magical education, and their exceptional mages also scattered and were lost in the folds of time... After another few generations, its people’s distinct features will probably be nowhere to be found anymore.”

All of a sudden, I remembered a phrase that I’d noted when I first visited Orient. “The Orient Mist...”

The first thing that had stood out to me as “foreign” in Orient was the color of the citizens’ hair and eyes. Unlike in Centoria, where blond hair and blue eyes dominated, hair in Orient was either a shade of gray or black. In the empire, they referred to it as the Orient Mist. The emperor was a good example—his hair was the light hue of ivory, and his eyes the ash-blue of a cloudy sky. Lord Yukinari had long, black locks like Princess Kaguya, and his eyes were lapis lazuli

blue. Suzuiro, like her name suggested, had dull silver hair the color of metal. And thus my black hair didn't stand out, making it easy for everyone to accept me.

"In the past, there was the term Septentrion Sun, too."

Before I could respond, Lord Raiya smiled and ran his fingers through his hair. Tresses as vivid as fox fur flowed down his back, and suddenly, they seemed as bright as dawn to me. *So...that's why the battered white ribbon stands out so much...*

Chapter Fifty-Seven: The Jealousy of Men with Power is Frightening

"**THAT** being said, the person on the receiving end of these...*affections* didn't really think of himself as a descendant of Septentrion. The public opinion was, well, 'A brat from the remote countryside and lacking in ancestry climbed to a position he did not deserve solely due to the favor of the emperor.' That was probably how people described it. And yeah, I'm not surprised that everyone thought the previous emperor went mad." There was a self-deprecating note in his smile, and Lord Raiya changed his display on the wall. "Anyway, now do you understand what kind of ridiculous troublemaker the previous emperor was?"

"Yes, mostly."

"And, well, I don't even have to explain what happened next, do I? The overbearing reforms improved many things, sure, but humans don't remember results—their emotions are more lasting, especially the discontent and grudges they nurse. More than anything, the citizens despised how their god tried to become a 'human.'"

"A human..."

"The emperor established a harem and had plans of siring heirs with several consorts—regardless of status, mind you! Eventually, he would fill the court with his blood-related family and the families of his consorts, or at least, that

was his intention. It's a very common strategy for 'human' kings. But the ruler of the Orient Empire is a god with wings. They are only borrowing the womb of a human before their birth, nothing more, nothing less, which meant that up until then, the emperor would have only one, pure successor. But what if this successor had siblings? The god would turn into a mere human—and that's not what people see as their emperor."

I felt conflicted as I listened to him talk. I believed that the previous emperor hadn't established the harem with the intention of betraying his people. Civil unrest had been on the rise, and he likely had simply wanted to stabilize the position of emperor by producing many heirs and populating the court with his family. Although the weight on our respective shoulders was incomparable, I thought I also understood the fear of my bloodline ending with my generation.

"Does His Majesty have any siblings?"

"Nope, nobody else got pregnant. No matter how hard he tries, the mandate of heaven probably decrees that the emperor can only have one heir."

"...So it turned out to be an error, I see."

That decision had probably dealt an even harder blow to the authority of the previous emperor.

"It also took quite a while before Emperor Haruka was born," continued Lord Raiya. "Because of that, once the empress dowager was pregnant with His Majesty, she hid him away in her family home and protected him from the malice of the world until he grew his wings—until he became the genuine god of this country."

"And that was when you taught him as his mentor, I see."

"Well, I was recently banished from the imperial court and happened to have a lot of free time." He shrugged.

I couldn't come up with a reply.

Lord Raiya snapped his fingers and shut off his display. He got off his seat and stretched. "Let's end things here today. We've gotten through a good lot of them," he muttered.

“Huh?” Reflexively, I whipped my head around to look out the window. The sun glared down at the earth with radiant light; it was still far from the end of the workday.

I hesitated. “I still have some time, so I could finish it all.”

Working as a pair, our efficiency had increased in spades, and the amount left was meager enough for me to complete on my own.

Lord Raiya, however, shook his head. “Go back. If you do this much work within the span of a day, you’ll be way too conspicuous as a mage.”

“Oh, good point...” Mages were few and far between in Orient. I wanted to avoid standing out like a sore thumb if possible.

“Cut a little more corners when you’re working. Don’t use all of your power—sixty percent is already more than enough in your case.”

“My apologies...”

“I understand your enthusiasm, but...I don’t want you to turn out like me.”

A moment of silence.

He resumed, “You see the reports we’ve put together over there? Grab those and hand them to me. I’ll pass them on to the regional administration department.” He accepted the documents from me before giving me a light pat on the head. “Emperor Haruka invited you here to this nation, and he didn’t want you to turn out like me—that’s why he prepared so thoroughly beforehand. In truth, it’s actually better if people get the impression that you’re somewhat incompetent. Don’t go overboard with your talents and become an eyesore to the bureaucrats. A word of warning: the jealousy of men with power is terrifying.”

“Thank you very much...” I replied slowly, bowing my head to him as he strode toward the office door. I was beginning to grasp why the emperor had arranged my meeting with Lord Raiya.

He wanted me to meet someone who understands my position as a person who isn’t wholly from Orient.

“Ah, before I forget, Sai.” Moments before he exited the room, he swiveled to

face me. He pointed upward with a finger, his eyes narrowing as he slyly grinned. “I suggest you watch the sky tonight. The southern sky, to be specific.”

I blinked. “The sky?”

“You’ll get a good show. I’ll see you tomorrow then.”



UPON my return to Sekirei Palace, the lady attendants and maids gave me a rundown of their activities that day. Afterward, I enjoyed dinner and a bath. The water glittered like gemstones as it reflected the evening sun, and by the time I was fixing my hair in my chambers, darkness had overtaken the sky.

I sat on a chair in the upper-story room and stared out at the dark scenery, sinking deep into my thoughts. Stars twinkled in the southern firmament, and nothing significant had occurred so far.

I murmured, “I’m sure that the surviving descendant of Septentrion he was referring to...”

But then—a sudden, blinding flash of light exploded in the clear sky. With a loud, devastating boom, lightning ran across the southern horizon.

I gasped in shock and leaned forward to peer at the area in question.

In succession, bolts of light fissured the sky and loud claps of thunder sent shock waves rippling through the ground like the strike of a drumstick. The sounds echoed menacingly like cannon shots. I inhaled sharply, watching on.

“His Majesty is...performing a ceremony...”

Lightning pelted down incessantly like rain. I had a theory about what was happening. A large river lay in that direction. Likely, the emperor was performing a misogiharae before the rainy season, and the sacred ritual playing out served as a prayer for an abundant harvest and few floods.

The event itself was transpiring far, far away, yet for a moment, I almost believed that I could see the beautiful back of the emperor right in front of me and that his voice was tickling my eardrums. I could picture it: the emperor reciting a poem in sonorous tones audible to all. He’d be raising his staff, and his garments of white silk would flow like a waterfall as he summoned lightning.

Those who bore witness as they attended the ceremony would be mesmerized by his otherworldly appearance and divine authority over nature.

For a while, the roar of thunder prevailed. When it ceased, applause and excited shouts started to ring out everywhere, only multiplying in volume, from the streets in the city and the imperial grounds. Gratitude and praise for the emperor crashed into the capital and engulfed it like a tidal wave.

Alone, I clasped my hands together and prayed to the heavens, which were finally silent. *Please... May His Majesty be loved by his people forever and ever.*



THE next morning, I headed to the Department of Print as usual. There, I found Lord Raiya and Lord Yukinari together. Lord Raiya, for once, was in an adult form. They appeared to be deep in conversation.

I must have entered Lord Raiya's vision, because he raised his hand slightly in greeting. "Speak of the devil and she shall appear. Hello, wagtail girl."

"Good morning. Did something happen?"

Lord Yukinari's eyebrows furrowed. "Actually..."

In contrast, Lord Raiya sported a brilliant smile that was all teeth. He seemed to be up to no good. Facing me, he said, "Hey, you. Could you cross-dress for a bit at a festival?"

Sixth Arc: The Cross-Dressing Wagtail Priestess Heads to the Location of the Golden Eagle Emperor's Imperial Visit to Keep Him Company at Night

Chapter Fifty-Eight: Time to Cross-Dress, Lady Sai!

THE breathtaking azure sky stretched to the end of the horizon, and the lush, green rice paddies raced to keep up. Ridges twisted and turned on the slope of the mountain, creating terraced fields.

I'd been brought up in a culture that didn't dabble much in rice, yet somehow the scenery felt soothing and nostalgic to me, which was a little strange. Was it because of my memories of my previous life, perhaps?

If I'd come there on vacation, I was sure that I would have relished the opportunity to slowly marvel at the gorgeous view, but alas...

I was riding on a horse with Lord Yukinari, who held the reins as we dashed across the rural landscape.



APPARENTLY, during one of the misogiharae rituals that the emperor was performing, a participating bureaucrat had come down with a high fever.

After that brief explanation, I'd been shoved into a room inside the Department of Print, where I frantically made the necessary preparations to dress as a man.

I could hear the chagrined voice of Lord Yukinari through the partitioning screen. "Those with high fevers cannot attend any divine rituals, since they are seen as impure. In such cases, the common practice is to look for a substitute from among their blood relations. This man, however, is a feudal lord who governs a territory far from the capital, and even if he summons an available

family member, they will not make it in time for the rites.”

Lord Raiya’s voice rang out. “And that’s kind of a big problem.” His sleeves, usually folded up, hung down neatly that day. His voice was deep and that of an adult; he seemed like a whole new person compared to the boy I knew him as. “His Majesty is purifying the land, so if the delegate of a major clan isn’t there, then, well... First, it’s disrespectful. Second, he wouldn’t be praying for the stability of the land together with His Majesty, which is a whole can of worms right there.”

The reason why clicked in my head. “Ah, right. I have heard legends about districts of local magistrates who don’t participate in misogiharae ending up with terrible harvests, or things along those lines...”

Some of the envelopes that I had spent the past few days organizing had contained regional folklore hailing from each respective area. In one of the letters, if my memory served me right, a grandma was concerned that “The local magistrate here is quite sloppy about misogiharae, and I’m scared that we might get a bad harvest.”

From beyond the partition, Lord Raiya concluded his explanation. “We don’t really want anyone to make any waves right now, you know. We’re super busy this season. So, Sai, could you go as a standin?”

“Wait, this is an adult man we are talking about, yes? Is it really all right for me to be his substitute?”

“You happen to have the same hair color, and once you slap on the *kanmuri* cap, the standard headwear for men in the imperial court, everyone looks the same anyway. Plus, the little brother that couldn’t make it is only ten years old. So both your height and your voice fit the criteria. Hide half of your face with cloth as well, and it won’t be a problem.”

“Can we make this request of you, Lady Sai?” asked Lord Yukinari gravely.

Faced with their expectations, I nodded. “If I can be of help, please count on me.” But then—

“Lady Saaaaaaai! It’s been too long! It’s your Suzuiro!”

She rushed into the room with so much momentum that I nearly hallucinated

a loud screech as she skidded to a stop. I couldn't see what was going on due to the screen, yet I could easily imagine the expressions Lord Yukinari and Lord Raiya were wearing.

“Lady Sai! I shall help you get dressed; please count on me! I actually happened to come prepared today, and whew, I had perfect timing!”

It'd been a while since I last saw Suzuiro, and she was as energetic as always. She and a maid worked together to swiftly peel off my clothing before dressing me in an outfit that reminded me of the Japanese *sokutai*—I put on a men's hakama skirt and an outer robe. The ensemble was completed by a kanmuri cap with artificial hair, and instantaneously, I was transformed into a young, long-haired boy.

A protracted sigh issued from beyond the screen, deliberately loud. It was Lord Raiya. He grumbled, “Hey, can that court lady learn to speak at a normal volume?”

“It might not seem like it, but she is actually much quieter than she was at the beginning,” I replied.

“...Tell me you're joking.”



“**LADY** Sai, we will arrive very soon. It has been a rather rough journey on the horse. Are you feeling all right?”

Lord Yukinari commanded the horse to stop, and we entered the shade of a copse of trees along the road to take a short break. He fetched some water from a small stream, which I accepted gratefully.

We'd traveled quite a lengthy journey on horse that day. Lord Yukinari must have been feeling rather warm under the sun. Even as Lord Yukinari expressed concern for my condition, I could see that his long, black hair was stuck to his forehead and neck with sweat. He was wrapped in an outer robe of navy blue, over which he'd donned armor despite the summer heat. It had to be sweltering.

“Thank you very much. Lord Yukinari, you should get some rest as well.”

“I am fine. I am used to traveling on horseback. But I am sure that you are not, Lady Sai. Please tell me as soon as possible if it is strenuous for you.”

“The medicine for motion sickness seems to be doing its job, so I am doing all right.”

Lord Yukinari finally sat down next to me—perhaps my words had reassured him.

I’d planned ahead: before I left, I gave Suzuiro instructions for my absence and asked her to bring me a potion made from the afternoon moon mint that had been growing in our garden. Using my own magic to ward off motion sickness was possible, but a potion ensured that I wasted less mana on the way there. I was going to be a participant in one of the emperor’s misogiharae rituals and wanted to save my mana in case of an emergency.

Curious, I asked, “Lord Yukinari, over there—is that the ancestral shrine where His Majesty is?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “We should make it in time for the misogiharae at noon.”

We’d proceeded south along the river without rest after departing the capital. Nothing obstructed our line of sight, so I easily spotted the shrine on the distant riverbank. It appeared to be bustling with activity. The river breeze blew by, and I felt a pleasant chill on my neck, which was slick with sweat.

Lord Yukinari watched the horse drink as he inquired in a low murmur, “Have you adapted to life in this nation yet?” His curtain of long Princess Kaguya hair cascaded down his sturdy body, fluttering in the air like silk ribbons. “I am thankful to you, Lady Sai... His Majesty is a lot more cheerful than before. He is so energetic, in fact, that he may actually have to work off the excess.”

I hesitated. “Do you think so?” I’d always thought of the emperor as a bright person who constantly wore a gentle smile, so I was surprised to hear Lord Yukinari’s suggestion to the contrary. But then I immediately changed my mind. “Indeed, considering how stiff and strained his mana circuits were, his body must have paid the price.”

“Even our clergy cannot help His Majesty in any way when it comes to supporting his vast mana expenditure. If we had to find someone who could fill

your shoes, I believe only Lord Raiya could possibly fit the requirements.”

I paused. “Ah, that is a good point. His Majesty’s mana pool is massive, and if someone tried to give him some of their mana, their pool might be sucked dry and cause them to suffer mana deficiency.”

“I have actually wanted to thank you for a while. Not as His Majesty’s subject, but as his family.” Lord Yukinari looked at me squarely in the eye, and the corners of his lips twitched in the ghost of a smile. “If possible... Please continue to stay by His Majesty’s side. You are the only one who can support him and help him shoulder all the responsibilities he holds, Lady Sai.”

“I am very honored, but I do not deserve those words.” I shook my head slowly. “I am only doing what I ought to as the Wagtail Priestess... But thank you.”

“Please pay a visit to my estate some time. My wife and family are all eager to meet you, my lady.”

“Of course. I would love to go!”

It was then that the horse raised its head from the stream, and Lord Yukinari got to his feet.

Soon, we would finally arrive at the scene of the rites. With that in mind, I braced myself and refastened the cord on my kanmuri cap that doubled as a wig.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Frolicking with the Water God

WE somehow arrived just in time for the rites to begin.

The river that the emperor would purify was wide, and its currents fast. The pillars of the shrine on the riverbank towered above us, the floor actually elevated to over the average height of an adult man. I could see stairs in the center of the building, and when I let my eyes slide up them, I spotted a set of open double doors. Inside, thin, partially see-through bamboo blinds revealed the vague silhouette of the emperor.

With stilted movements, I adjusted my cap and the veil that covered half my face as I walked toward an inconspicuous corner and joined the orderly queue of people in front of the shrine. I had but one job: to line up, wait, then greet the emperor at the very end. At first, I was so worried about blowing my cover that my heart had leaped into my throat, but the other participants didn't pay me any mind. As if reciting scripture, they were absorbed in offering prayers to the emperor.

I released an internal sigh of relief. *Phew. I think I can make it through without being exposed.*

The line started to move, and I obeyed the proceedings strictly. I kneeled, then greeted the emperor on his throne inside the shrine. When I lifted my head furtively, I saw through the gaps in his veil that he was smiling. Amusement danced in his narrowed eyes. His lips moved subtly as he mouthed, "What are you even doing?"

Oh... He's realized who I am. I lowered my head once more before departing the platform, trailing after the procession in front of me. As I exited the shrine, my eyes met with Lord Yukinari's—he had been overseeing the event. He gave me a reassuring nod, and I felt relief wash over me, although I didn't display it.

I had merely filed past and bowed to the emperor. It was an uncomplicated ceremony, yet if even one person were missing, everything would fall apart. In fact, its simplicity had made me more anxious. Hiding my face as much as I could, I retreated to my seat and prayed that everything would end without incident.

After some chants and rituals, the emperor revealed himself as he stepped out of the shrine. The rustling river breeze ruffled the emperor's large wings and garments of white silk, then lifted the veil that hung from his crown. Everyone present closed their eyes at once to avoid looking at his face, and I hurriedly followed their example.

The wind carried the emperor's voice in my direction as he recited a poem. He was speaking in archaic Oriental—using the same words that I had been unable to decipher before. That day, however, I could understand exactly what he was saying.

It was a greeting. The descendant of the Amawashi who hailed from far across the ocean was paying his respects to the local gods, asking that they permit humans to flourish, and inviting them to continue to govern and protect the land together. His verses weren't about conquest or control, and instead constituted a kind request made by the representative guardian deity of humans.

Ah, I see... I read through all those letters from a variety of regions and unconsciously gained a better understanding of the expressions in this language...

With a swivel, his staff chimed as he chanted on. He sang praises of the river goddess's beauty, he echoed the murmur of trees, he celebrated the coming of summer, and he expressed his joy at the comfortable breeze that brushed across his wings.

His chant is calm, peaceful, and simply enchanting... The wind doesn't drown out his voice at all, and he never wavers...

My curiosity got the better of me, and I cracked open my eyes to take a peek. The first thing that filled my sight was pristine white—his silk garments. The second was his large wings extending magnificently across his frame. Light reflected off the water and decorated him like diamonds, making him glow like a star. His hands were outstretched as if to embrace the boundless heavens, and his ivory hair fluttered in the wind.

What happened next, however, was a surprise: suddenly, the water of the river molded into the shape of a dragon, which then soared into the air.

I barely stifled a gasp. None of the other attendees seemed to be observing the scene I could make out with my limited vision—a water dragon gamboled and coiled in the air around the emperor almost as if playing a game with a friend. I could hear the spattering of water as it moved, and it rained glistening droplets onto the emperor.



Though the emperor was getting drenched, he smiled broadly as he stroked the bottom of the dragon's chin as if it were a friendly pet. Elation was clear in the creature's movements as it frolicked around a little more before soaring into the sky. There was a thunderous splash, a veritable explosion of water.

The emperor raised his staff and directed radiant mana toward the river, appearing as if he were scattering jewels that sparkled under the sunlight. I could only watch, absolutely captivated.



THAT night was a repeat of the lightning festival I had seen the previous evening. I could feel the deafening booms shake the ground—the impact was much stronger closer to the epicenter. Apparently, a person's eyes would burn if in the vicinity of the ritual, so only the emperor and his guards were at the site. The rest of us stayed the night in a facility near the shrine. Of course, I couldn't let other people discover my true gender, so I avoided all attention by shutting myself in my private room and waited out the evening.

"I wish to pray for my brother's swift recovery, so please allow me some privacy tonight" was the excuse I had given everyone, which they accepted readily. *Well, to be more accurate, it's probably because they don't really want to interact with a boy whose live-in relative is down with a fever.*

Alone, I lay sprawled out across my bed. Caution required that I still wear my masculine attire.

I heard a knock on the door.

It turned out to be Lord Yukinari. "His Majesty is calling for you," he said, then paused. "Please follow me to the shrine."

Chapter Sixty: His Nightly Companion—The Emperor Waits Inside the Ancestral Shrine

WITH Lord Yukinari in the lead, we passed between the guards flanking the

gate and stepped onto the premises of the shrine. Red hanging lanterns illuminated the building in vibrant colors, and intricate wall paintings depicting a water god gleamed under the light.

Once we arrived at the stairs, I advanced alone and entered the area partitioned by bamboo blinds. I found the emperor waiting in the bedroom—he appeared to be relaxing on the bed with his wings spread out leisurely.

“Thanks for all your hard work today.” He smiled.

The dim and indirectly lit chamber brought out a different kind of charm in the man. Under sunlight, he was a divine, godlike emperor. Inside the room, he was a man with a bewitching allure.

I lowered to my knees and greeted him as I should before he asked me to sit next to him like I always did. The scent of incense permeated the square room, and when I craned my neck to observe the ceiling, my vision filled with art. It was crammed into every corner and looked ancient. The room itself was also much smaller than his bedchambers in Kita Palace. Perhaps that was why the emperor’s delightful fragrance seemed more intense than usual.

A rustling of clothes. The emperor edged closer to me. “Did you get to enjoy some of Orient’s scenery on your journey here?” he asked.

“Yes. Well, we rushed here on horseback, so I did not have much time to admire the sights, but... It was peaceful and serene. The rice stood tall and proud, and the people were out working without a shred of anxiety on their faces. I am sure that they were all elated to have the honor of seeing your misogiharae, Your Majesty.”

“I’m glad if that was the case. After all, it’s my job as emperor to be a beacon of hope for everyone.” Though he sounded as if he was trying to quash the emotion, his subdued whisper struggled to contain the joy in his tone. For some reason, his voice seemed to tickle my ears, and my pulse quickened. Maybe I was feeling over conscious because it’d been a while since we were together in private.

The emperor’s beauty was ethereal as always, and his wings lustrous and just as eye-catching. During the day, he’d sported a summer palette—white silk robes with a dyed-blue sash—and had since changed into loose nightwear. His

soft feathers stretched across the bed, looking rather like an exquisite coverlet.

The light was faint. The room was more confined than usual. The emperor's voice was hushed, and whenever I turned my head, he was right there, smiling as he gazed at me softly.

For a moment, I almost felt as if he'd locked me away from the entire world.

"Your Majesty..." I muttered slowly.

"Hm? Yeah?"

"Do you often invite people to your room and converse with them like this?"

"If I have business with them, yep." A pause. "Well, I'm usually more formal and emperor-ish. I think the only other person I'm so down-to-earth around is Yukinari."

Relief settled in my chest, and my mouth moved faster than I could think as I blurted, "Ah, that's good."

His eyes grew wide, as though he'd heard something peculiar, and he jerked forward in my direction. "Good...? What do you mean by that?"

I faltered. "Um, well, I just thought that some might become impudent and have unsavory thoughts when they interact with you at such close proximity..."

"Unsavory thoughts?" he echoed. "Did you have one of those, Sai?"

"I-I...!" *Why is he being so persistent about this?* A little taken aback, I inched away from him. "Uh, you are a very charming man, Your Majesty, so... Um, such misleading actions would be..."

"What kind of misleading, hm?"

"Um... Uh..." I could feel the wall against my back. I had nowhere to run, and my eyes darted around nervously. *How should I answer him?*

Option one: "Someone might end up falling in love with you." Rejected. To dare to think of the emperor in that way was extremely disrespectful.

Option two: "Someone might do indecent things to you." Also rejected. That would be slandering his subjects. And to imply that the emperor was so weak a man as to be harmed by a vassal was also very disrespectful.

My mind whirled. Then... *Oh!* One suitable idea emerged from the chaos of my thoughts.

Cautiously, I said, “I beg your pardon for my insolence, but...” I bowed my head as he neared me. “I cannot narrow it down to one thing. What kind of ideas would they get? And who would think in which ways? Yet there is one fact I am sure of: in the unlikely scenario that your people find your relationship with one of your subjects problematic, it will lead to ill repute. No matter what the rumors may be, it will pose a threat to your authority. You have the entire Orient Empire on your shoulders...”

After a deep breath, I pressed on. “Thus, I... Learning that you carefully select the people who can be alone with you at so close a distance... I am relieved. That was what I...what I thought.”

Silence.

The emperor was the first to speak. “Raise your head, please?”

At his command, I faced him once more. The teasing expression I’d seen only moments earlier had vanished, replaced with a flat, unreadable mask. Stillness had overtaken his eyes—the aftermath of a storm of emotions and thoughts.

Was my answer...all right? Apprehensive, I waited for his next words.

And like melting ice, a smile pulled at the corners of his lips. “I made the right choice when I asked Raiya to meet you.” As I’d speculated, the emperor had something in mind when he arranged our meeting. “Did you hear about my father?”

I hesitated. “Yes.”

“Raiya was my father’s capable right-hand man. To me, he is an irreplaceable teacher who offers me criticism without reservation.” He paused. “When I rescued you, Sai, he gave me much advice about the current situation in Centoria and effective ways to make them do what I want.”

My eyes widened. *So Lord Raiya was my savior as well...*

The emperor grinned at my expression before resuming, “My father trusted Raiya with his life. When he made an imperial visit to the area that was once

Septentrion territory, I hear that Raiya, the son of the regional governor, was chosen as his guide. If I remember correctly, Raiya was around thirteen at the time. During that visit, my father saw promise in him, and the household of the previous emperor's mother—my grandmother's family—adopted him. He studied at the university and graduated top of his cohort.”

Lord Raiya's youthful form was around the age he'd first met the previous emperor—the year of his life-changing encounter.

“So... He truly has the blood of Septentrion in his veins...”

“Yep. His hair is like a fiery sunset, and the color's a common sight in former Septentrion territory.” Nodding, he explained, “Raiya was born with a talent for magic as well as critical thinking and creativity—skills that the bureaucrats of the central government lacked. My father doted on him like a foster brother and apparently granted him hefty political influence.” His eyes darkened. “Among those who call my father a fool, there is a certain percentage that do so out of baseless resentment at the fact that a descendant of Septentrion got involved in government affairs.”

I cast my eyes down. “Oh, Lord Raiya...”

“However...” He trailed off. “There were a few reforms that started during my reign. Incorporating the visits to rural areas to perform misogiharae into our roster of major annual events, developing the highway... In truth, I wasn't the one who first brought these matters to attention. It was my father.”

“I see...”

“And that's why I honestly think that I've just been benefiting from the previous emperor's efforts so far; I haven't established my own reign, at least not yet.” He shrugged and chuckled. “I still can't even hold a candle to my father or Raiya.”

I shook my head. “I do not think so...”

He was belittling himself, but I personally thought he was impressive. Despite his youth, he had the overwhelming support of his empire as its sovereign. Yet... the emperor's gaze was warm as he stated his respect for his father. He didn't sound as though he was trying to be humble. Rather, I felt that he was filled

with admiration for the previous emperor.

“A discrepancy existed between the people and the central government, as well as the countryside and the capital. The previous emperor wanted to mitigate these problems. So he chose to scout those with talent regardless of their upbringing, and Raiya was one such person. He made use of his authority as the emperor and elevated these gifted outsiders to positions that could make a difference. It was intended to raise the quality of life of the entire empire, but...”

He didn’t have to continue. The outcome was clear.

“Your Majesty, I have a question...”

“Go on.”

“How did you manage to reinstate Lord Raiya as a government official in the imperial court? Though his role in the Department of Print is technically an honorary one with no power... There must have been heavy opposition.”

“I haven’t reinstated him. According to the public records...he isn’t at court.” His lips pressed into a thin smile. “Raiya is a genius. You only come across someone like him once a decade or perhaps century. There are tons of things that only he is capable of. Originally, I actually wanted to give him a position that more befitted him, but...he declined and opted to seclude himself in the depths of the Department of Print. Only the Generals of the Twin Wings and I know that he’s there.”

“Oh...”

“There were also some bureaucrats who attempted to reinstate him as a sinecure within the imperial court, but Raiya was firm in his refusal, and I wanted to respect his will.”

Chapter Sixty-One: Please Bite Your Pillow and Endure

THE emperor hummed. “It was around the time that the faction that had most reproached Raiya fell from grace one after another, leaving only political

moderates at court, so that's why such offers came up."

My breath hitched.

"Raiya was essentially under house arrest in the countryside, and it was pretty clear to everyone that if we didn't summon him back, the empire would be stuck in limbo, unable to move forward." His tone was nonchalant, as if he were talking about the weather. My instincts, however, told me that it was a delicate topic, and I chose to divert the conversation somewhat.

"Um, Your Majesty..."

"Hm? What is it?"

I hesitated. "Will you be condemned for allowing me to stay near you?"

"You mean... Like Raiya and the previous emperor?"

"I... After hearing Lord Raiya's story, I am a little scared of the possibility that you could gain a bad reputation for protecting me... I am a foreigner, yet you give me special treatment, and if that makes your position unfavorable..." I chewed my lip.

He'd bestowed upon me Sekirei Palace, my new residence, and had permitted me to participate in an imperial festival. The people around me even pedestaled me as the Wagtail Priestess. In Centoria, I had been an outcast with nowhere to go, and I was honestly still unused to my change in circumstances.

But more than anything—one fear hung over my heart like the blade of a guillotine. The cutscene of the emperor's tragic end that I'd seen in my previous life flashed in the back of my mind. *I don't want to be the cause of his empire's downfall...* My chest tightened as anxiety pelted it like rain. My hand clutched at my heart, crumpling the fabric of my masculine attire.

At the sound of my hoarse whisper, the corners of the emperor's ash-blue eyes softened, and he gave me a reassuring smile. "The government won't react so aggressively in your case. Raiya was a man who inherited the stigma of a ruined nation and a bureaucrat. If he climbed the political ladder, he posed a threat to the men around him! I mean, I guess if I appointed you as a female bureaucrat and gave you as much influence as Raiya had, it's not that impossible."

“...Yes, I think so too.”

“I personally don’t want you to become a bureaucrat. Besides, that kind of stuff isn’t your cup of tea anyway, right?”

“It really isn’t. Whether in the Inner Palace or the imperial court... I do not think I am cut out for subtle political games.”

During my time in Centoria, I witnessed all kinds of disputes within the palace. Nobles vying for power under the table. Married noblewomen, who’d received a share of influence from their husbands and birth families, viciously tearing each other apart with smiles on their faces. I’d found it difficult to navigate such situations—it just wasn’t my thing.

Even in a more peaceful exchange a few weeks before—when I’d invited all those businesswomen to a party to gather intel—I was utterly spent the following day. Given my disposition, survival in the world of politics as a female bureaucrat was completely out of the question.

“Then you’re fine. If you disguise yourself as my harmless trophy, it’s easier for me to protect you, and I’m sure you’ll have more freedom as well.” The emperor paused, appearing a little apologetic as he added, “I probably should have worded that better.”

I shook my head. “No. Thank you. I do not want to drag you down by making a fool of myself in a field that I have no place in. I would much prefer solemnly focusing on fulfilling my duty as a priestess.”

“And you have my full faith and expectation. Furthermore, unlike Raiya, although you originate from a foreign nation, your looks are similar to that of an Oriental citizen, and in the eyes of the conservatives, the Cutrettola lands—Sekirei Prefecture—are more Orient’s territory than Centoria’s. Everyone’s very excited to have you at Sekirei Palace.”

“...I felt that warm reception during the festival,” I admitted.

“Right? See? You’re *fine*. So go ahead and dupe all those officials for a good cause.” A sly grin lit up his features, and I couldn’t take my eyes off him.



Abruptly, he turned away so his back faced me. “Hey, could you get on with the usual now?” He glanced over his shoulder, meeting my eyes, and tilted his head slightly like a child asking for attention. “You know what I mean.”

Cloth slid over smooth flesh with a rustle. His nightwear melted away, exposing his fair skin, and I was reminded of my purpose: I remained so close to the emperor in Orient because of my duty to heal him. Management of Sekirei Palace and my work with Lord Raiya ultimately came second.

Large, magnificent wings of a golden eagle were attached to the flawless back presented to me—those of the man I ought to protect.

I threw out all unnecessary thoughts and focused my mind as I gave him a low bow. “Then, Your Majesty...I shall begin.” Mana flowed into my fingertips, and I gently touched his back.

“Mn...” The emperor’s breath hitched slightly. Almost instantly, I felt all the mana in my body start to rapidly siphon away, although I had barely brushed his skin. If I had to describe the sensation, it was as if a vacuum cleaner were sucking my fingers at full power.

My hands trembled as color drained from my face, and the emperor must have noticed, because he smiled wryly at me over his shoulder.

“The place I performed the misogiharae today was, well... During the rainy season last year, the river flooded, you see,” he explained.

My eyes widened, and I inhaled sharply.

“It didn’t cause any casualties or damage to the fields, but the embankment upstream was destroyed, and we still haven’t managed to fix it. That’s why I offered up a bit more mana than necessary to the water goddess to butter them up, and, well... My thunder is really compatible with the water goddess, so they kind of ended up snatching away a little too much.”

The emperor’s tone was easygoing, yet I could tell how much the extra amount had burdened his body. I took a deep breath. *I know that I might cause problems for him if I stay too close. But if his mana pool dries up, the entire nation will be thrown into a disarray more chaotic than even that of the game scenario. Right now...I am the only one who can protect His Majesty.*

“Understood. In that case...I shall invest all my effort into your treatment tonight. First, please lie down on your stomach.”

“Mm-hmm.”

While the emperor shifted position, I scanned our surroundings. After spotting the item I was searching for, I grabbed it and passed it to the emperor, who was hugging a pillow as he lay down.

“A...cushion?” I could hear the confusion in his voice.

“Yes. When you can’t control your urge to cry out as you do in our usual sessions, please bite on this instead.” I hesitated. “Guards are stationed near the shrine, and if your voice leaks out...people will find out that I am here.”

The emperor blinked a few times, a blank expression on his face. Then redness started to creep across his cheeks. “I... I don’t know whether I should be happy or something else about how you’re so considerate...” he mumbled in a small voice.

“Please excuse me, then. I shall begin.”

Similar to meridian points in acupuncture, the pressure points for mana circuits were dotted along either side of the spine. In the emperor’s case, strain was especially prominent around the area where his wings left his back—his shoulder blades. Tracing my fingertips over his skin, I felt for his mana circuits, closed my eyes, then commenced weaving words of power.

“Please pardon me for my transgression. I shall address you by your holy name, Emperor Haruka. We are in an inconvenient location tonight, so I am afraid that I will have to make this brief. Feel my mana... It is like the ocean at high tide. I shall pour all my amassed mana into your parched body until the torrent penetrates even your deepest parts, spilling over and swallowing you whole.”

Heat gathered in my palms, and not a moment later, the emperor convulsed as he suppressed a guttural noise. His breaths were rapid and erratic. He bit hard on the cushion, and his back tautened as he endured the onslaught.

“Your Majesty...!” I gasped out.

Molten streams of mana surged from my abdomen into my arms, then into the emperor's back. It was too much—my body was nearly pushed away, but I braced my knees and steadied myself against the storm. Gritting my teeth, I pressed my palms against the skin of his back.

I heard a muffled groan. His wings flapped noisily. I concentrated hard, careful not to be shoved away by his wings as I filled him with my mana.

The next thing I knew, the emperor was fast asleep.



THE next morning, I joined the line of people in front of the shrine and waited for the emperor with the group. Finally, he appeared, and we all greeted him respectfully on our knees.

As I lifted my head, I could see the emperor from behind. His wings were glowing, making him look simply divine. He was brimming with mana and seemed even more radiant and captivating than usual.

And from the whispers of his mesmerized subjects around me, I likely wasn't the only one who thought so.

"His Majesty's aura is especially godly on this wonderful day..."

"I am certain that the water goddess will be pleased—I can already see the success of the misogiharae here."

I let out a small sigh of relief. *Phew. When I gave him too much yesterday, I think I kind of broke him for a moment, and I really panicked, but... You never know how things will turn out, huh?*

I participated in that day's misogiharae as requested, and it ended without incident. Together with the emperor's other vassals, I returned to the capital.

Upon my arrival, I peeled off my male disguise and beelined to Lord Raiya to give my report. I found him in the office in the depths of the Department of Print. He was in his youthful form as always, sitting on the stepladder while he tackled his work alone.

When he saw me, his eyes narrowed slightly, and he murmured, "Mm, welcome back."

Though only a few days had passed, I felt an odd sense of nostalgia when I laid eyes on him. *Looks like I really grew to enjoy talking to Lord Raiya. I probably missed him in the back of my mind.*

“Your work’s still there, just as you left it,” he said. “Let’s leave our jobs for tomorrow. Join me in indulging my sweet tooth today.” He nimbly hopped down from the ladder and, between blinks, assumed an adult form. “I’ll listen to your report while we eat. Follow me.”

“Yes, sir!”

Chapter Sixty-Two: Memories of Someone Gone and a Bond of Silk Ribbon

A while after the rituals, an evidently credible rumor started to circulate within the imperial court: the emperor had used some method to enable the Wagtail Priestess to accompany him during the misogiharae. And if one traced back through all historical precedent, they would discover that only the emperor’s wife was allowed as a companion during such rites.

Naturally, people started to speculate. And those in politics, as always, began to calculate.

“...Like we thought, His Majesty really *is* going to choose the Wagtail Priestess as his wife.”

“In that case, it may be wise to curry favor with the priestess as soon as possible. This is not the time to pursue preparations for the harem—there is nearly no hope of it being reinstated.”

“What might the Wagtail Priestess want...?”

“Ladies-in-waiting. And educated women with a wealth of knowledge in medicine, apparently.”

“I see. I need to arrange for some family members to apply to Sekirei Palace as attendants, then.”

“The noble Wagtail Priestess does not have any political backing. In other words, our daughters who climb the ladder at Sekirei Palace can then become her supporters.”



THE color of night stained the sky like ink as a magpie swooped through the air in soundless flight. Its vision enhanced with magic, it easily navigated the darkness before quietly slipping through a window into the Department of Print.

The only sources of light in the room were dim, silvery threads of moonlight and the glow of Raiya’s eyes as he channeled mana. He raised his arm, making a perch for the magpie, and smiled warmly at the bird as it landed. His expression was filled with a softness he’d never show to a human.

The exhausted magpie, which served as Raiya’s second pair of ears, melted into its master’s embrace as he cradled it in his arms.

“Thanks. And here... Your tip. Get some good rest.” After feeding the bird, Raiya placed it in a nearby cage. Then, motionless, he stood before the window streaming with moonlight and turned the information over in his head.

The misogiharae had concluded without incident. And just like he’d planned, a certain rumor had begun to spread.

It had all started with a lie. In truth, there had been no need for the priestess to cross-dress as a standin. Emperor Haruka had ordered Raiya to come up with a scheme to sneak the Wagtail Priestess out of the imperial palace, and Raiya had done exactly that. Yes, a bureaucrat had indeed come down with a high fever, requiring a substitute. In such cases, however, the selection of a representative outside the bloodline was unofficially acceptable. It was an unspoken exception.

It was also, in the end, a practice that people couldn’t outwardly support. Instead, everyone turned a blind eye whenever they glimpsed an unfamiliar face on a substitute. Most of the time, young boys or teenagers were chosen as the emergency standin from among the students working as attendants in the imperial court. And of course, hardly any bureaucrats memorized the appearance of every single apprentice.

Therefore, no one would have ever deduced that a common student substitute was actually the Wagtail Priestess in disguise. The thought wouldn't even cross their mind in the first place. After all, how could someone of such status so brazenly infiltrate a place filled with officials?

"As they say, 'He that would the daughter win, must with the mother first begin...' So, his plan is to win over all the people around her first, hm?" Inside the moonlit room, Raiya fidgeted with the ends of his long hair.

"That wagtail girl has a strong sense of responsibility. If many women with talent and promise are sent to Sekirei Palace, it's clear her sense of duty would compel her to take good care of them. And in the unlikely scenario that Centoria tries to someday take her back, if she's already a vital cog in the machine known as Orient, even her home nation wouldn't succeed in snatching her away. The people of Orient would also likely unite in their support of her."

Besides, Sekirei Palace was a ceremonial ornament.

"With the increase in court ladies whose family honor rests on their shoulders, some might desperately try to raise the status of Sekirei Palace within the imperial court. Yet ultimately, Sekirei Palace is secluded from political influence. Those feudal lords who hope to use their daughters to spark a power struggle will fail. The resulting 'fire' will stay confined to Sekirei Palace and eventually snuffed out."

Raiya's muttering dissolved into the stillness of the night.

"And most importantly, the Wagtail Priestess has no interest in political affairs. She will likely maintain her neutral position and adopt the guise of a harmless trophy without struggle. Because she doesn't pose a political threat, even if something does happen, as long as it doesn't get out of hand, the bureaucrats will stop at indifference toward her..."

Additionally...he was willing to bet that Emperor Haruka would take the previous emperor's failure into account and select a bride with an innocuous background. Among all the choices out there, the Wagtail Priestess was the most inoffensive one possible; no one could compare. She had neither a clan's agenda nor a lust for control. And an ancient, prestigious blood ran in her veins, which made her a viable candidate in the eyes of all Oriental citizens—the

heritage of the Wagtail Priestess. To name her his empress would be the most harmless option.

Once those lords shoved their daughters onto her, she'd earnestly train them as court ladies. An influx of competent women into the imperial court would provide relief to one of Orient's weak points, nonpolitical diplomatic functions.

At present, none of the men in power in Orient was wary of females gaining influence in government. They probably didn't even care whether the women could aid with diplomacy.

But that was for the best—for the moment, it was better that they remained oblivious to Sai's abilities and how dangerous court ladies could be as political opponents. In their eyes, the women were just for show. Cute little dolls that could be used as diplomats. Baubles to add a touch of color to festive events. The men made light of court ladies because the emperor was intentionally misleading them.

Because the emperor didn't want them to view Sai as a threat and label her a black sheep for everyone to trample on.

Raiya unfastened the ribbon that bound his hair. Wings were embroidered on the white silk with ivory thread. He'd worn it for several decades, and time left it discolored and tattered.

Wistful, Raiya whispered, "Your Majesty..."

When Raiya had truly been the age of his younger form, Emperor Harunire had been thirty-three, the same age as Raiya's biological father.



THEIR first meeting was during Emperor Harunire's imperial visit to Raiya's homeland. At the man's request, Raiya toured him around historical sites, where one could glean the culture and government of Septentrion before it had fallen to ruin.

Afterward, Raiya served local specialty sweets at the state guest house to entertain the emperor. But that didn't go so well, because the guests learned that the confections hadn't been made by professionals in the field but by an elderly commoner woman who hailed from a family that dated back to when

Septentrion thrived. The Generals of the Twin Wings at the time were furious, reproaching Raiya for his lack of respect.

The emperor with large wings, however, shook with laughter, not anger. He tucked his veil behind his ear, exposing his face as his long, well-defined fingers reached out. A pinch, a plop, then a chew. One sticky rice cake was gone.

The man chuckled. “You have a very keen eye for what I want, young one.”

Emperor Harunire was a tall, robust man whose eccentricity was immediately apparent, for he didn’t even follow the tradition of obscuring his face.

“Tell me more. What do the commoners of this former Septentrion territory eat? What do they take pride in? And what troubles do they face? You are someone who has a profound understanding of the poetry and laws of Orient, and I want you to speak without reservation about everything you see and experience in these lands.”

Everyone agreed that what most stood out about the emperor when they first laid eyes upon him was his magnificent wings. Then they would notice the white, pristine cloth that symbolized his authority, as well as the man’s fair skin—even his fingertips were the color of snow. His curly hair was the hue of faded cherry blossoms, a shade close to gray, and his eyes were ash blue like a clouded spring sky. His every aspect was ethereal, and with one glance, anyone would recognize him as the living deity of the empire.

As the son of the region’s governor, Raiya had received several feudal lords before, yet none of them could compare with the emperor. The man seemed more fiction than real.

“For the longest time, the government of this nation has been spoiled by the profits of the medicine industry, choosing to focus only on domestic matters. I, however, believe that we should concentrate on the people who bring prosperity to my lands: the commoners, including those in rural areas. That, and foreign countries as well.” The man’s eyes met Raiya’s. “I cannot sit by and let the people of your homeland taste the bitterness of hardship a second time. This is Orient’s responsibility as the empire that took your lands under our wing.”

Raiya found himself admiring the man’s strong, beautiful gaze. And that was

the moment when Raiya encountered his cause. He wanted to work hard to achieve that man's ideals.

Later on, Raiya was adopted by the emperor's blood relatives, and like a comet, he blazed a trail toward the heart of the empire. To him, Emperor Harunire was his lord, his teacher, his foster father, and perhaps even a comrade-in-arms merely a bit older than him.

In all of Raiya's memories, the fire in the man's eyes never wavered. Whether during a time when the emperor's future looked bright or when his government eroded along with his health and people cursed him a fool, or in his late years when his son developed wings as his death crept closer and closer.

Raiya owed a lifetime of gratitude to Emperor Harunire. But the youth was robbed of the opportunity to serve the emperor until the man's dying breath because he was banished before he could realize any of their dreams.



“MY lord, Harunire. Your son is trying to accomplish what you did through different means. Not only that, but he even... He is actually trying to create a safe haven within the imperial court for a weak foreigner with no background, swearing to succeed this time. You two are identical in many ways. And he has inherited your foolishness as well.”

Ironic. A laugh tickled his throat.

“Was I perhaps a bad teacher...? What do you think, Your Majesty?”

He wondered whether the Wagtail Priestess would navigate the circumstances better than he had. He combed through his hair with his fingers, pulling it into a bundle, then tied it tight with the ribbon once again. The ribbon was the only thing that he'd had the honor of receiving from the man, and the thin strip of silk was the lone string that tethered him to the imperial court.

“I'll work hard so that I can see your half-finished job through to the end. For just a tad longer.”

The previous emperor had been scorned. The current emperor was adored. But their policies and actions were very similar. The only difference was the era and their approach.

In Raiya's mind, the previous emperor's fall from grace was his fault—because his plan had been a flawed one. Thus, the realization of the man's noble goals, even if they had to be accomplished by other methods, was Raiya's way of atonement. An atonement that he would dedicate his entire life to.

Interlude: Lilly in the Meantime

LILLY. That was the name I'd given on the spur of the moment when I arrived in the magic circle. A thoughtless name I made up on the spot by translating my real name into English.

I was honestly just your average player. An average player who existed in the world of the game for the sole sake of having fun.

Me in my original world? Ha, who would want to even think about that? A worthless, trashy life—that was what it was. I had no place in or outside my home, and I was constantly deceived by cheaters and men out for my body. I was the dregs of society, life was dull, and I could hardly see any worth in trying.

So you see, I didn't have much of a choice. I ended up clinging to that hella tedious, waste-of-my-time thing they called "love," pretending to be happy and all. But inside, I was like an old, worm-eaten rag, and I joylessly counted the monotonous, hollow days passing by.

Then an ad for a certain mobile game caught my eye, which turned out to be the game I eventually found myself living in. I loved stuff like being fawned over by male harems and being reduced to a mess by manly men, sooo...

"She has it good. I also wanna live a slacker's life and get pampered."

The moment I uttered that, things changed.

The next thing I knew, I was in pitch-blackness, the only glow my phone screen. A solemn voice was flowing out from it, calling to me, so I jumped in. And who would've guessed? A game started!

So yeah. At first I was pretty convinced it was a dream or a hallucination or something, cuz it didn't seem real at all.

Like, the noble, dignified king guy was crying on his knees, begging me. “O Lilly, Saint of Centoria and our savior. Please, I beseech you, save this country.”

For some reason, I had actually answered some sorta summons, and lo and behold, when I looked in the mirror, I was one of those beautiful girls so “perfect” that they definitely were hiding one or two shady things in real life. A game avatar someone poured a lotta money into in-app purchases for, basically.

“U-Ummm... Yes.” I put on a smile, and they all cheered like crazy.

It didn’t take too long before I noticed the special power I’d gained. I could manipulate people who met my eyes and make them do my bidding. *Huh. Iiinteresting, so this is the Saint’s power*, I’d marveled.

That was back when I still believed it was just a long dream and not reality.

But you couldn’t blame me! It was waaay too easy. If I’d known it wasn’t a dream, I would’ve given a more carefully thought-out name when the king asked me for an introduction.

One day passed. Two days passed. A month passed.

Once I realized it wasn’t a dream after all, I technically did put some thought into everything. First, I learned that the duration of my eye contact with someone was equal to the time I could control them. As for the extent of my control, it depended on their opinion of me.

I also worked out the conditions, but honestly, they weren’t much. One: I had to know their name. And if the “Saint” was asking them, most would tell me. Two: they had to recognize me as Lilly. Well, I was the “Saint,” so everyone knew me, naturally. Three: they had to possess a certain amount of goodwill toward me. That was easy, because I was “me,” so people fussed over me without my having to lift a finger.

When sexual stuff was involved, I held even more sway over them—which meant that I could lead most men around by the nose. Okay, let’s put it in simple terms: in the case of a stranger who looks at me and thinks, “I want to bang her,” if our eyes locked for five seconds, I could control them for five seconds. Ya know, make them say what they shouldn’t or have them punch

someone.

On the other hand, if they hated me or were strongly resolved about something, they wouldn't listen to me at all. Well, maybe a tiny bit.

The king was pretty impressive, seemed like he wasn't a king for nothing. Even when I stared into his eyes and suggested, "Have you considered having concubines?" it actually had the opposite effect and made him even more stubborn. And the queen got even more depressed and anxious cuz of it, so like, the guy really didn't know his way around a woman's heart. Oh well.

Meanwhile, the clergy and holy peeps were pieces of cake. Especially those guys in the Order of Holy Knights. They'd buy anything I wanted and do any illegal thing I commanded. One guy even charged out in public as naked as the day he was born, total social suicide. I hadn't expected that he would actually go that far, and I thought, *Oh, this guy's way too stupid.*

The Order of Holy Knights was, like, filled with people as repressed as straight guys starving for women in a mountain hermitage. Those chads forced down their libido with rules and discipline, basically. I suppose the oh-so-holy Saint with her soft skin and gentle smile was too exciting for them or something.

The Holy Knight Commander Alexei fell head over heels for me immediately. He had been super easy to read when he first saw me after my summoning. I mean, anyone could tell that he was in too deep after witnessing his face light up like that. Ya know, like the kind of expression you'd make when a flower blooms right before your eyes or when you discover something you want to live for. And well, I gave him a big smile.

The guy listened to eeverything I said, and it felt so good. I think I made him smack his fiancée two or three times. The entertaining part about it was that I was the person who had him hit her for no reason, right? But after the dude does the punch, he somehow invented excuses in his mind and declared, "I hit her for a reason. Anyone would do the same in my position." He'd justify himself by thinking that the woman must've deserved it!

It was both funny and downright disgusting. He said the same thing as those "boyfriends" of mine when they had come to beat me. So, well, I decided I'd ruin him!

Anyway, I turned the Holy Knight Commander into my plaything, embezzled all the Order's funds, and destroyed the guy. I didn't really do it out of resentment or a grudge or anything. It was more that the world had practically been served to me on a platter, and I was so overpowered that humans all seemed like flimsy paper cutouts. At that point, I didn't really feel empathy for them or anything, really. I was having the time of my life, hah!

But then, before I'd realized it, more and more of them started becoming suspicious of me, so my powers weren't as effective against an increasing number of people. They stopped listening to me. The king also couldn't fully cover for me anymore. As for the Holy Knight Commander, well, he got laid off temporarily and was going on a journey of self-discovery or something, sooo...

The way everyone did a one-eighty was pretty spectacular. But hey, I gotta make one thing clear: all I did was present them with a chance.

For example, let's say I made someone shoplift. But it wasn't like I forced them to walk out of the store with the item; they were the ones who chose to leave without paying. Or let's say I had a guy coerce a girl he liked into accompanying him to a love hotel for "intimate activities"—the only thing I did was help them relocate, nothing more. What happened next was simply their own desires in action after I gave them a boost.

For some odd reason, everyone was convinced that I'd been the mastermind behind it all, that they'd only committed such crimes under my influence. But, well, they couldn't accuse me openly. After all, I was the almighty Saint, there at the behest of the king. So they all opted to hate on me from a distance, avoiding eye contact with a triumphant look on their faces. I noticed, for your information. As unimportant NPCs, you were all so needlessly humanlike. Hah.

Pretty much all the people in the game world fell under one of two categories: they either did exactly what I said or they passed the buck after carrying out my orders.

Then there was Sai—that woman was the first person to interfere with my fun, which thus far had been smooth sailing with all cheat codes activated. I had definitely met her eyes, but... She didn't shout abuse at Alexei. The woman pushed all her anger down into her chest and forgave him with a sigh. She was

the first human I encountered who I couldn't turn into a puppet.

Musing, I muttered, "Is she maybe...someone like me?"

She had been the only troublesome one. Oh well, whatever, she'd been long since banished to the neighboring nation. Even if she tried to strike back at me in the future, it wasn't my problem. I mean, I was already dead to begin with in my original world. Even in the new one, all I had was the title of "Saint." I didn't have anywhere to go or anywhere I belonged.

I didn't have anything precious to lose, so...I would do what I wanted and fritter away as I pleased. That was enough, don't you agree?

Bonus Short Story: Haruka, Seeking Raiya and Sai's Company, Makes a Surprise Visit to the Department of Print

THE cool breeze of morning swooped into the archives through the window, blowing across the whole room. The white garment that sagged off Lord Raiya's youthful frame fluttered and stretched with the wind as he sat on his usual stepladder.

We were inside a secret archive deep inside the Department of Print where only Lord Raiya and I worked. The sole noise was the hum of our mana, the scratch of pen across paper as we smoothly noted down the results of our experiment, and the rustle of documents in the draft.

But abruptly, a certain sound broke the office's harmony. Soft footsteps approached our room, accompanied by the swishing of cloth. I could detect hints of a sweet, mild scent—it was a woman.

And indeed, a melodious female voice rang out, "Ah, I was wondering where you were, Sai. Now I've found you."

Its owner was the feminine form that the emperor assumed whenever he wanted to go around in secret: Lady Haruiro. With a smile on her face, she gazed at Lord Raiya and me as we bowed in greeting. Then she slid behind a bookshelf. I sensed a gentle pulse of mana before the emperor reemerged as his usual male self.

The height of his waist had changed, and he adjusted his sash before spreading out his wings in the same way someone would stretch their back. "Ahhh, freedom," he sighed.

The emperor's surreal beauty was unchanged. His long robes of silk that trailed behind him, his artistically groomed ivory hair that had been tied up with a decorative cord, his ash-blue eyes like a vaguely cloudy sky... No matter how many times I studied him from up close, he still looked like a man who'd walked

out of a painting.

“Your Majesty.” Lord Raiya pouted slightly in displeasure. His fluffy, fox-colored ponytail swayed with his movement. “You may be in your female form, but coming here without any guards is careless.”

“Sorry, my bad. And well...” The emperor craned his neck and surveyed the ceiling. “What were you two doing? That’s a lot of mana you’re releasing.”

In every nook and cranny, one could spot birds constructed with magic, almost as if all of the archive was a birdcage.

Lord Raiya was the one who answered. Behind round glasses, his vivid, serene eyes of emerald turned toward the creatures. “We are testing out a new method of information management that Sai proposed for the archives. With this system in place, anyone with mana will be able to instantly extract their desired information from all the texts available.”

Somewhat see-through birds flitted above our heads—birds manifested with magic. The system was pretty simple. If someone whispered, “O bird, tell me about [insert word here],” the information would be projected as light onto one of the white walls.

I let one of them perch on my arm as I explained, “We have assigned different categories to different species of birds. Golden eagles are in charge of divine texts and religious writing; magpies cover history, biographies, topographies, and travelogues; and wagtails are assigned to literature and linguistics.”

“Interesting.” The emperor nodded, eyes narrowing as he allowed a bird to alight on his finger. “By the way, is there any special reason you chose these specific birds?”

Lord Raiya and I shared a look, and I let out a sheepish chuckle. “Well, we are still nailing down the system, so... I chose birds that I think are cute.”

“I see. I see, I see. Yeah, picking birds you like is best.” A wagtail strutted past the emperor’s feet with tiny footsteps. Smiling, the emperor cradled it in his hands. He nuzzled his cheek against the bird and grinned contentedly. As the Wagtail Priestess, watching him fawn over a wagtail made me feel a little embarrassed.

Then he muttered, "But that makes me jealous."

I loosed a small yelp of surprise. The emperor had snuck up beside me and enveloped me with his wings. When I glanced up, the emperor's face filled my vision. His eyes of ashen blue were half-lidded, and my heart skipped a beat.

"I mean, *your* golden eagle is right there, Sai, yet other golden eagles are occupying your time... I can't believe this."

I stared at him dumbly, struggling to decipher the meaning behind his words. A moment later, my eyes widened with realization and my face paled. "M-My deepest apologies! Golden eagles are a symbol of Your Majesty, the Amawashi, and I used it for a spell like this without permission...!"

He chuckled. "It's okay, I don't mind that. After all, learning that golden eagles are one of your favorite birds makes me very happy."

"I-I am so sorry for my insolence..." I buried my face in my hands.

Through the gaps between my fingers, I saw Lord Raiya shrugging in exasperation. "Oh wow, so it was just a coincidence? I thought you did it on purpose since you chose the bird connected with our god as the one to represent divine and religious texts, but huh. Who would've thought? It was just because you missed His Majesty. Tsk, tsk."

"U-Um, ummm!" I stammered.

The emperor grinned. "Heh, so you feel the same way about me, Sai." His arms locked me in an embrace from behind, and with his large wings secluding me from the outside world, I felt my heart race. "Whenever I see wagtails, I miss you so much..." he murmured. "Did you know that? That's why I'm here right now."

"I-I see..."

His arms still around me, the emperor puffed out his cheeks. "But Raiya's keeping you all to himself!" He sounded as though he was sulking, and I caught a glimpse of their past relationship as teacher and pupil.

Lord Raiya had a hand on his hip as he gave the emperor a look. "Well yeah, what else did you expect? It's been ages since I was able to reveal my identity

as Raiya. I even came across a partner in magic research; she's a great help. If you want the best for your empire, Your Majesty, please learn to be a little more independent from Sai."

There was a pause before the emperor begrudgingly grumbled, "I guess you have a point there, Teach."

He released his hold on me and extended his wings wide. Light filtered through the seams between his feathers, and then... Numerous, tiny golden birds materialized with a brilliant light, reminding me of the sun peering over the horizon at dawn.

"Wow...!" I marveled.

It was almost as if the emperor were pouring molten gold across the entire archive, and, eyes narrowing, the emperor smirked as he said, "I'll help too in that case. Since you're testing applications of mana, having more mages around would surely make things faster."

For an instant, Lord Raiya had been overwhelmed by the blinding light, though he quickly recovered and asked, "That would be a great help, but are you sure it won't affect your official duties?"

The emperor turned to me and winked before replying in a confident voice, "I've already rearranged my schedule for my official duties in the afternoon, and the only thing on that list is spending time with the Wagtail Priestess until the day ends."

"Wha... Wait, what?!" My eyes widened.

"Now I'll be able to do work that'll benefit my empire without having to be separate from Sai, am I right?"

Lord Raiya frowned, unable to come up with a retort. "I suppose you have a point..."

I, meanwhile, was panicking. "U-Um, Your Majesty...!"

No one warned me about this! Won't this cause trouble for Lord Yukinari and other people in court?! I mean, being able to spend more time with His Majesty is wonderful, but...!

The emperor seemed to have noticed how flustered I was. “It’s totally fine, don’t worry,” he added. “I’ve already gotten everyone’s consent and permission. I worked really hard to ensure that.”

Lord Raiya sighed. “Fine. Do what you will. In that case, I shall squeeze every last drop of effort out of you!” His face shifted from familiar mentor to stern researcher as he rolled up his sleeves. He dove right back into brainstorming new designs for mana pathways.

“You can count on me, Master Raiya.” The emperor tucked his ivory hair behind his ears, very eager to start.

The interaction between the two was likely an echo of their past, and it was a heartwarming sight. A smile tugging at the corners of my lips, I joined them and looked down at the plans.

Afterword

IT'S a pleasure to meet you—or if you're already familiar with my work, it's a pleasure to see you again. I'm Makino Maebaru, the author. I chanced upon the opportunity to work with Cross Infinite World and ended up publishing my first ever translated work in my career as an author.

First, thank you very much for picking up this book! This novel was my first long-form story published on the *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* website. I honestly never thought that I would get an offer from a publisher for this work, but it's a special story to me, so I'm elated that it has been turned into a book.

I love Asian fantasy settings and also have a passion for androgynous male characters with wings. Haruka is a character I love very much! The Orient Empire is part of a fantasy world that wasn't modeled after any place in particular, although I referenced Kanazawa, Japan, a tiny bit. Kanazawa experiences heavy snowfall and fierce thunderstorms and has a beautiful traditional craft of gold leafing. I was born and raised in a southern region (Fukuoka Prefecture) that receives no snow, leading to my powerful yearning for Kanazawa, which I think led to Haruka's creation as a character.

Sai, meanwhile, is the classic type—in my mind—of cute, beautiful girl with black hair who takes everything seriously. I really like heroines with black hair, and she's another character dear to me whom I weaved together from my favorite things.

I would like to end by thanking every single one of the people who were involved in publishing this book—all my wonderful readers who cheered me on when the story was in serialization, Charis of Cross Infinite World, the artist, the designers, and the translator, as well as everyone else. This wouldn't have been possible without you.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my friend, Ms. Bon, who cheered me on even before I made my debut, as well as Mr. T from Maebaru whom I respect very much. There is another person I'd like to thank: my

grandmother Kumiko, my biggest and longtime supporter who encouraged me to write novels. Thank you so much. Please live a long life.

Well then, I hope to see you in volume two!

Makino Maebaru – 05.26.2022



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